THE VICTORY BOY SCOUTS

PATHFINDER

OR

THE MISSING TENDERFOOT

THE VICTORY BOY SCOUTS

BY

CAPTAIN ALAN DOUGLAS

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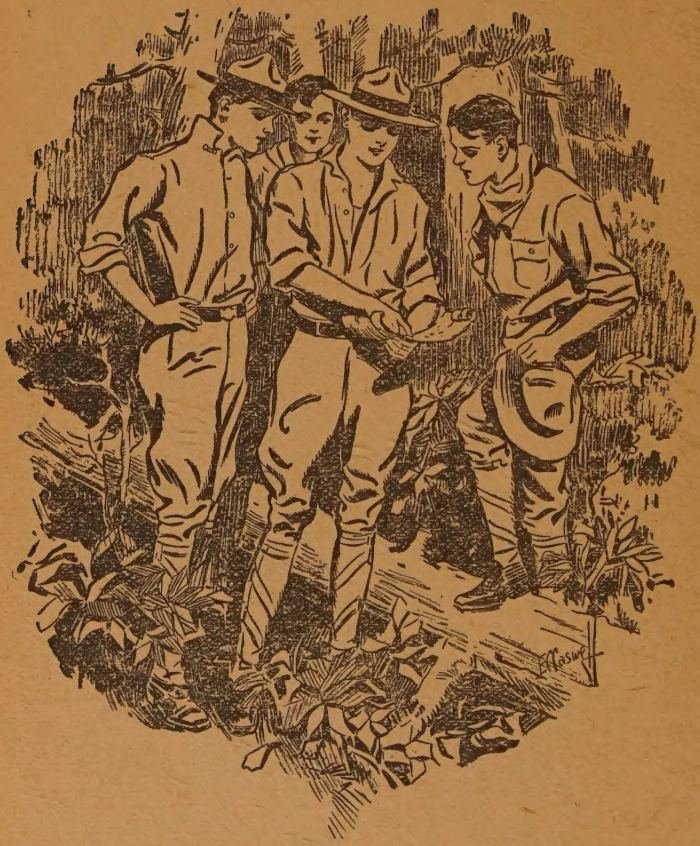

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M. A. DONOHUE & COMPANY

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PATHFINDER

OR

THE MISSING TENDERFOOT

THE HICKORY RIDGE BOY SCOUTS

PATHFINDER;

OR,

THE MISSING TENDERFOOT.

CHAPTER I.

THE BIRCH-BARK MESSAGE.

"HOLD on, boys; here's a stick standing upright in the trail. And look, fellows, there's a piece of nice new birch bark held fast in the cloven end, that grips it like the jaws of a vise."

"Say, it's a message, all right."

"And from our crack-a-jack pathfinder, Elmer Chenowith, too, I warrant you."

"What do you say, Matty? Is Red Huggins right?"

Seven boys had come to a halt in the heart of the big woods. They were a rather husky-looking set, all told, and evidently bent on getting all the benefit possible from being outdoors through the last few weeks of vacation time.

The one appealed to, Matty Eggleston by name, was something of a leader among the Hickory Ridge Troop of Boy Scouts.

In fact, he was at the head of the Beaver Patrol, and studying constantly in order to attain the rank of a first-class scout.

There are so very many things a boy must know in order

to reach this ambition that comparatively few scouts ever attain it. But by concentrating all his energies upon one particular study he may earn a merit badge, which it will make him proud to wear.

Matty took the piece of bark from the cloven stick. The other six boys clustered eagerly around, anxious to see what sort of message it could be that the assistant scout master had left in the trail.

They were out to try a new experience, and one that appealed to every boy in the bunch.

A party of the scouts, their identity and number unknown to Elmer and the balance, had started off for the woods early in the day.

An hour later, Elmer, with one companion, had taken up the trail, and when a second hour had elapsed the balance of those who were bent upon playing the game left town in two detachments.

It had been arranged that Elmer was to act as pathfinder and tracker. He would in turn leave a plain trail that a child could follow.

Besides this, he had promised to transmit from time to time some sort of message. Thus those who came along in the rear, in two detachments, would be kept in touch with events, and also advised as to what they should do.

The party bringing up the rear was headed by Mark Cummings, who was Elmer's particular chum. He was really the bugler of the troop; but for this occasion Elmer himself carried that instrument, with the idea of calling the scouts together at some time later on.

"Hey, look at that, would you; it's all marked up with crow's feet tracks!" exclaimed Landy Smith, a rather fat

boy who had only recently joined the Wolf Patrol, making the eighth and last member.

"What's Elmer think we are, a lot of kids, to leave us an illustrated rebus to guess? Look's to me like a little boy's first try to draw cows and Noah's Ark people."

Some of the others laughed when George Robbins gave expression to his disgust in this way. George was a cousin to Landy, and had also recently signed the muster roll of the scouts, although he belonged to Matty's patrol, the Beaver.

"You've got a heap to learn yet, George," said Red Huggins, shaking his head at the offender.

"In what way?" demanded the other.

"Why, this is what they call Injun picture writing," replied Red, obligingly.

"Oh! it is, eh? But what's that got to do with finding a trail, or following one that's already found?" asked the latest tenderfoot.

"A heap, as you'll soon learn, my boy," replied Red, with a pitying look, as if he could not understand how anyone should be so green. "Matty, suppose you enlighten him a little, won't you—that is, if you've got through reading your letter?"

"Letter!" ejaculated both Landy and George—"that thing a letter?"

"A short and sweet one," remarked Matty. "You see, Elmer has signed it with what I make out to be the paw of a wolf. That's the totem of his patrol, while mine is a beaver tail, and the third one would be the claw of an eagle."

"Say, that sounds kind of interesting like," observed Landy. "I rather expect I'll cotton to this same Injun picture writing letter business, once I get at the secret key of it."

"That's where you're away off to start with, Landy," remarked Matty, laughing, "because you see there's nothing hidden about this business at all. In fact, the one particular idea with the one who writes a message in Indian picture writing is to make it so simple a child might understand."

"Well, I declare," cried the fat scout, who was not in khaki uniform like four of his companions, simply because he and George were waiting until the town tailor, father to Jasper Merriweather, one of the members of the troop, could complete their suits—"then, if a baby could understand what our pathfinder has left for us, perhaps now there might be some chance for me."

"Oh! it's as easy as falling off a log, once you get the hang of it," declared Larry Billings.

"Look here, and I'll show you, fellows," remarked Matty, holding the bark up so that everyone present could see the lead-pencil marks.

"Looks like several men, to start with," interposed George.

"Good enough, George," said the patrol leader, "and that's just what they are. Count them, will you?"

"One, two, three."

"That's right. So you see, to begin with, our pathfinder tells us the enemy ahead are three in number. Now, do you see anything close by those three figures of men?"

and Matty held the bark directly in front of Landy and George.

"Sure," replied George. "Under one is a mark—say, it looks like the same down at the bottom of the letter, and you said that was the sign or totem of the Wolf Patrol."

"Just so; and this tells us the first fellow is a member of that patrol. Under the others you will see marks to indicate that they are members of the Beaver and the Eagle patrols."

"That's so, Matty; I can see 'em," declared Landy, who evidently did not wish his cousin to get all the credit for smartness.

"All right. Let's get on a little," said Matty. "First notice two have hats on, while the third wears none. Now, you may think that an accident in drawing, but it isn't at all. Elmer meant it for something."

"And I can guess what it is," declared Chatz Maxfield, the Southern boy.

"Then tell the rest of us," cried several.

"Why, it's dead easy," was his reply. "Stop and think; who's always losing his hat every chance he gets?"

"Nat Scott!" quickly exclaimed Landy.

"All right. And don't we happen to know that Nat was one of those who went ahead of Elmer and Lil Artha by an hour or so," laughed Red.

"Well, I declare!" cried Landy, "and do you mean to say Elmer has guessed that, or did he see the fellows before he wrote this letter?"

"Neither one nor the other. He just figured it out from something he found. Perhaps he knows what the

print of Nat's shoe looks like, for we all make different tracks, you know."

"Yes," said Chatz, "that would be just like Elmer. He's the most observing, wide-awake fellow I ever knew since I came up from the South. I've seen him measuring some of our tracks, and making a copy in that wonderful little book of his."

"Now, let's get on a little further. Do you see that the second figure, no matter how often he appears, always has his left leg bent a little?" and Matty pointed in several places to confirm his statement.

Immediately Red laughed aloud, and then in one breath he and Larry exclaimed:

"That's Ty Collins, as sure as anything!"

"I guess you've hit the mark," said Matty, "and that was just what Elmer was trying to tell us. Ty's left leg has always been a little crooked since he fell out of that cherry tree three years ago. Now, the third fellow got me at first, but come to look at him he seems a little different from the others. See here, and here, and here."

"That's a fact," declared Landy, scratching his nose in a way he had when puzzled.

"He can't mean he's a dead one, and sprouting wings, can he?" asked George.

"Wings! I've got it, fellows!" shouted Red.

"Then pass it around to the rest, because I'm all up a stump," observed Larry.

"Shucks! don't you know there's only one fellow in the whole troop who's always sighing because he can't fly, and wishes he had wings?" demanded Red, promptly.

"Toby Jones, the boy who's bent on sailing through the clouds some day!" cried Chatz.

"Exactly," remarked Matty. "And in this clever way our pathfinder has told us who the three scouts ahead are. Now he shows them coming to a fork in the trail. One goes to the north, and the others to the northwest. Which party can be carrying the wampum belt we expect to trace down?"

All of them looked again, and while several shook their heads Red remarked:

"Seems to me one of the two that kept together fell down just at the fork of the trail. Was that only an accident, Matty, or a part of the play?"

"I believe it was done on purpose," the other replied. "Because, if you look closely, you'll find that the one who stretched out on the ground was Ty, and that from that time on he has a funny little wiggly line drawn around his waist."

"Sure, he has. That must be the wampum belt," exclaimed Red.

"Yes. No doubt he was instructed by our scout master, Mr. Garrabrant, that when they separated the fellow carrying the belt must do *something* to show it. That was a clever dodge of Ty's to lie down, and make an impression in the earth."

"Yes, and smarter yet for Elmer to discover the impression, and read it," declared Chatz.

"What else does the letter say?" asked Landy, who seemed quite enthused now, after discovering how exceedingly interesting this communicating by means of Indian picture writing might become.

"Elmer tries to tell us he is pursuing the two who headed northwest. You see he has made an arrow showing this fact," Matty continued.

"But there are some other marks; can you make them out at all?" asked Landy.

"This is certainly a fire. Before separating, the three enemies built a fire and pretended to feed. Here they are sitting around the blaze and eating; and if you look over yonder right now, you'll see the ashes where the fire has been."

All of them hurried across to where Matty pointed.

"By all that's wonderful, there has been a camp fire here," said Landy.

"You're a little off there, Landy," corrected the leader of the Beaver Patrol; "this was only a little cooking blaze, not a camp fire."

"But what's the difference?" demanded the new recruit; "I thought a fire must be a fire."

"Well," said Matty, "when hunters are in a hostile country and want to prepare a meal they dig a hole and make a small blaze in it that will be hot enough for their purpose, but which might not be seen fifty feet away."

"And a camp fire?" continued the novice.

"Quite a different matter. That is generally a rousing blaze made for comfort, and at a time when no danger is feared. This was only a cooking fire," Matty went on to explain, as he again thrust the "message" into the jaws of the cloven stick.

"Do you know how long ago this fire was made?" asked George.

"The ashes are cold now, but they must have been warm when Elmer was here. He says so—anyhow, that's the way I read it. Here are four hands held up. Counting fingers and thumbs he wants us to know he has gained on the enemy, and was only twenty minutes behind when they separated at this fire."

"Well, that takes the cake!" ejaculated Landy, whose whole appearance indicated amazement.

"I wonder if it's going to turn out so?" remarked George, who was always unbelieving, and hence sometimes called by his friends "Doubting George."

"Well, we'll prove it later," said Matty, "because I am putting all these things down in my record. When we come together Elmer will tell us what he meant, and read our answers out loud. Then we'll see how that second squad come out. But let's be on the move again, fellows. Plenty to do before we overhaul our pathfinder, and find out if he secured the wampum belt. Come along, everybody!"

CHAPTER II.

AT THE HAUNTED MILL.

ONCE more the little squad of scouts resumed their forward movement.

Matty remained at their head, as before. This game was growing more delightful to him every minute, and some of the others were feeling the same way.

Of course it was easy work for those who came after, and the second bunch, headed by Mark Cummings, would have, as Red expressed it, a "snap."

The real work of following the trail was falling upon Elmer and his companion, the tall, angular fellow known among his mates as Lil Artha.

In carrying out the purpose of the game they were to do all the reading of the signs, and leave a plain track for those who came after. But the two detachments of scouts were expected to pick up as much knowledge concerning the methods used as they could.

Besides this, they must read the messages left occasionally by their pathfinder.

For quite some time the boys scurried along. More than once they had to quicken their pace to what Matty called a "dog-trot." This happened especially when the "signs" were very plain.

"Why all this haste?" asked Landy, who seemed to be puffing a little, because of his being rather a stout boy, and not very well up in athletics.

"Because we want to gain on Elmer when we have the chance," replied the leader.

"But look here, Matty," said Landy, "do you mean to tell me Elmer is getting along about as fast as we've been doing, when he has a blind trail to follow, and we have a plain one?"

"Looks like it, don't it?" exclaimed Red.

"But how under the sun does he do it?" pursued the doubting greenhorn.

"Well," Matty went on, "Elmer lived in Canada, away

up where our blizzards come from. He used to ride a wild broncho, throw a rope, hunt antelope and wolves, and was once in at the death of a big grizzly bear that had been playing hob with their cattle."

"Yes, I've heard all that," admitted Landy.

"So you see he learned a lot about following a trail that would never be seen by any fellows like us scouts. He knows a dozen signs that tell him the facts. And when greenhorns like Ty, Nat, and Toby try to fool him, why, he just eats the trail up."

Matty, as he finished speaking, came to a sudden pause.

"We might as well take a breathing spell," he remarked, "because we're getting pretty close to the meeting place anyhow. Besides, here's a chance for me to show you how Elmer manages."

The others crowded around, eager to see for themselves what object lesson Matty expected to lay before them.

"Now I want you to notice right here," he said, pointing to the ground, "that the footprints of the two boys ahead suddenly stop. Here are the plain marks left purposely by Elmer and Lil Artha. Do you notice how they run alongside this fallen tree?"

"That's a fact," declared George, as all of them walked slowly along.

"The two foxes in the lead thought to puzzle the hounds by jumping on this long log, and running its entire length," said Matty, with a grin, "but they had their trouble for nothing. Why, it was such an old trick that Elmer guessed it at a glance. He must have gained quite a lot on 'em here."

George and Landy exchanged glances.

"Well, there's a heap more in this game than I ever thought of," admitted the latter.

"Don't see how he does it," remarked George, with a doubting shake of his head.

"Oh, the more you study up on this thing," said Red, "the better you'll like it. No end of clever stunts that can be engineered. But see here, Matty, didn't you say we must be getting near the place where we expected to round up both foxes and hounds?"

"Yes, I'm looking to hear the bugle any minute right now," replied the leader.

"Where was it fixed for?" asked Landy.

"Oh, I thought you knew," Matty replied, as they once more took up the broad trail, at the point beyond the end of the fallen tree.

"I heard some talk about an old mill, but didn't pay much attention to it," remarked Landy, carelessly.

"Then you've got to turn over a new leaf, old fellow, if you expect to ever succeed as a good scout," Red broke in with.

"How's that?" demanded Landy.

"Because," replied the red-headed lad, himself always wide-awake and on the alert, "a scout to succeed must forever keep his wits about him and observe things. In fact, Elmer says he should take as a motto, besides the words 'Be Prepared' the old sign you see at railroad crossings."

"Stop! look! listen!" exclaimed Matty, Larry, and Chatz in chorus.

"I suppose I *am* somewhat sleepy," grumbled Landy,

" but perhaps some day I'll surprise you wide-awake Slim Jims by doing something real smart. But tell me more about this mill."

" You sure must have heard of Munsey's mill? " remarked Matty.

" Oh, I believe it does sound kind of familiar, but then I must have forgotten all I ever heard about it," Landy confessed.

Red and Matty exchanged glances, and shook their heads mournfully. It seemed a pretty tough proposition to ever expect to make a good and profitable scout out of such poor material.

" Well," said the patrol leader, " there is a long story connected with the old ramshackle mill. No use of my going into all the details. It's been abandoned a good many years now. People have tried to live there three times since old Munsey was found dead there, but they had to give it up."

" Yes, suh," Chatz broke in, his eyes shining brightly, for this was a subject that appealed very strongly to him, " they just couldn't hold out. Got cold feet after going through the experience and had to quit."

" But why? " demanded Landy.

" Because they declared the old mill was haunted! " replied Matty.

" Yes, suh, it was haunted," echoed Chatz.

The Southern boy had always confessed to a streak of superstition in his make-up. He admitted that he must have imbibed it from association with the ignorant little negro lads with whom he had been accustomed to play down on the plantation.

He had even admitted once to carrying in his pocket, as a charm, the left hind foot of a rabbit, which animal had been killed by himself in a graveyard when the moon was full.

The boys plagued Chatz so much that he had by degrees shown signs of considering most of his former beliefs as folly.

Still, the mere mention of a haunted house set his nerves to quivering. Chatz might be a timid fellow when up against anything bordering upon the ghostly, but on all other occasions he had proven himself brave, almost to the point of rashness.

It was "Doubting George" who burst out into a harsh laugh.

"A haunted house!" he exclaimed. "Ghosts! Strange knockings! Thrilling whispers! Ice-cold hands! Oh, my, what a lark! I've always wanted to get up against a thing like that. Don't believe in 'em the least bit. You could talk to me till you was gray-headed, and I'd just laugh. There never was such things as ghosts, never!"

Chatz looked at him rather queerly.

"Oh, well, perhaps you're right, George," he said, holding himself in check, "but I've read of some people who had pretty rough experiences."

"Rats! They fooled themselves every time," declared the boy who would not believe. "Bet you it was the wind whistling through a knot hole, or a parcel of rats squeaking and fighting between the walls. Ghosts! It makes me laugh."

"Same here," declared Red.

"Listen!" exclaimed Larry just then, making them all

start. Through the timber ahead of them came the sweet clear notes of a bugle.

"Told you so, fellows," declared Matty, smiling; "that's Elmer. He's learning to use the bugle nearly as well as Mark himself."

"Then we're at the end of our trail following, are we?" asked Landy, not without a sigh of relief, for it had not been as easy work in his case as with his less stout comrades.

"Well, pretty near," Matty replied. "We've got to keep it up till we come in sight of the mill."

"But why?" asked George, who seemed to want to know every little thing, so that his natural tendency to object might have a chance to show itself.

"Oh, well, there might be one more opening for a message, and our main business is to translate these, you know."

"Do we stay long at the old mill?" asked Chatz.

Red gave him a quick, suspicious look.

"Aw, I reckon I know what's on our comrade's mind," he remarked, with a wink.

"As what?" demanded Landy.

"Chatz thinks he'd like to prowl around some, and see if that ghost has left any signs. 'Tain't often he's had a chance to meet up with a real haunted house, eh, Chatz?" and Red gave the Southern boy a sly dig in the ribs.

"Never had that pleasure in all my life, fellows, I assure you," replied the Southern boy, with ill-concealed delight in his manner.

"But say, no respectable ghost was ever known to walk except at midnight, and we don't intend camping out at

the old mill, do we, just because of this silly talk?" asked George.

"Oh, the rest of us don't, but Chatz might take a notion to stay over," laughed Red. "When a fellow is set on investigating things he don't understand, and which were never meant for us to understand, there's just no telling how far he will carry the game."

Chatz gave him a lofty look.

"Thank you for the compliment, suh," he said.

They continued to follow the "spoor" of the two hounds, left so plainly for their guidance.

It was not long before another stick that held a bark "message" was discovered. And Landy felt immensely elated to think that by some chance he had been the first to see the "sign."

"I'll surprise you fellows yet, just mark me," he chuckled, while Matty was trying to read the queer little characters Elmer had marked upon the brown inner side of the fresh bark torn from a convenient tree close by.

"Wish you would, old top," remarked Red, with his customary enthusiasm.

"You'll get to like all these things more and more, the farther you go," said Larry.

"I feel that way already," was Landy's quick reply; "only I'm that clumsy and slow-witted I just don't see how I'm ever going to keep up with the procession."

"Elmer says it's only keeping everlastingly at it that makes a good scout," remarked Chatz.

Evidently, from the way these boys continually quoted "Elmer," the assistant scout master must be a very popu-

lar fellow in Hickory Ridge, and those who have made a study of boy nature can understand what rare elements the said Elmer must have in his composition to make so many friends and so few enemies.

"Come around and see what I've made out of this message," said Matty just then.

It proved to be the concluding communication, and in plain picture language informed those for whom it was left that the two foxes had stopped here, made a dense smoke to attract their missing comrade, and when joined by him, the three had gone on together to the rendezvous at the old mill.

"Fine," cried Landy, when he heard what a remarkable story those rude drawings told.

"Very good—if true," admitted George.

"Well, come along and we'll prove it," laughed Matty; "for unless I miss my guess the mill is close by."

"Sure," declared Red. "I can hear the noise of water tumbling down some rocks, or over a mill dam."

Five minutes later and Chatz called out:

"There you are, suh!"

The mill could be seen through the trees, and all of the boys felt the greatest eagerness to hurry along and reach this spot.

It happened that none of this bunch had ever set eyes on Munsey's mill, or the pond just above it. There were plenty of places nearer Hickory Ridge for fishing purposes. And besides, the dear familiar old "swimming hole" was more convenient than this place, nearly seven miles away.

"I see Elmer and Lil Artha," observed Larry.

"Yes, and there's another fellow just beyond. I reckon it must be Ty Collins," said Chatz.

Elmer waited for them to come up. He and his companions were standing on the edge of the dam which had long ago been built in order to hold up the water and form the big lonely looking pond beyond.

"Ugh, what a spooky looking place this is!" exclaimed Larry, as soon as they drew up where they could look out on the big pond, its surface in places partly covered with lily plants, and the long trailing branches of weeping willows dipping down to the water.

"It sure is, suh!" remarked Chatz, plainly interested, and not a little excited.

"Here we are, Elmer," called out Matty; "and I guess the second bunch will be along soon. I see Ty and Toby, but where's Nat Scott?"

Elmer gave him a serious look.

"That's just what we're wondering," he said. "They all reached the old mill, you see, but Nat seems to have disappeared in a mighty queer way!"

CHAPTER III.

THE STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF NAT.

"OH!"

Chatz was the only one who gave utterance to a sound after Elmer had made this surprising, as well as alarming, admission.

The others were looking, first at Elmer, then at each of his three companions as well; and finally out upon the dismal pond that assumed much the appearance of a lake, it stretched so far up the valley, almost a quarter of a mile, in fact.

Just then the only sound they heard was the noisy scolding of the water as it went over the spill or apron of the stout dam that had stood all these long years, defying floods and the ravages of time.

And somehow, there was something chilling in the very lonesome character of their surroundings.

Of the ten scouts present, Chatz seemed to be the only one who did not look solemn. There was an eager glow in the Southern boy's dark eyes, as though the situation appealed to that element of superstition in his nature.

And Elmer, noting this expression, that was almost of glee, knew that when the companions of Chatz fondly believed they had cured him of his silly faith in ghosts and such things, they had made a mistake. The snake had only been "scotched," not killed. It was already awakening again, under the first favorable conditions.

"Say, this ain't any part of the game, is it?" demanded Red.

"Yes, you don't expect us to guess what's become of Nat, and then find him grinning at us, perhaps astraddle of a limb up in a big tree?" remarked Larry.

"I asked these fellows," said Elmer, seriously, "and both Toby and Ty gave me their word of honor that no game or joke was set up between them. If Nat is playing a prank then he's doing it on his own account."

"And Nat ain't generally the fellow to think of playing a joke on his chums," declared Larry.

"Gee, this is getting wild and woolly now!" remarked Landy; "I'm all of a tremble. What if the poor fellow fell over this dam here, struck his head on a rock, and lies right now at the bottom of that black pool where the foam keeps on circling around and around. Ugh! It makes me shiver, fellows, honest and truly."

George, as usual, scoffed at the idea of anything having happened to Nat Scott.

"He'll show up as soon as he feels like it, make sure of that," he declared.

"Have you called him?" asked Matty.

"Yes, all of us did," replied Lil Artha, whose customary rollicking good nature seemed subdued in a measure for once.

"And he didn't answer?" demanded Chatz.

"We never heard a word, and that's a fact, boys," declared Toby Jones, uneasily.

Then they all looked around again, their eyes naturally roving in the quarter where, near the farther end of the dam, the old mill stood.

Its day was long since past. The great water wheel at the end of the sluice had partly fallen to pieces with the passage of time and the ravages of neglect. What was left seemed to be almost entirely covered with green moss, among which the clear little fingers of water trickled.

Suddenly a discordant scream rang out. It was so fearful that several of the fellows turned pale, and all of them started violently.

"There!" ejaculated Chatz.

His manner was almost triumphant; just as though he would like to demand whether these chums of his could not find some reason to believe as he did, after such a manifestation.

"Oh, glory, what was that!" quivered Landy, as he clutched the arm of Elmer Chenowith.

"But it didn't come from the mill," declared Larry. "Sounded to me like it was out there on the pond."

"Good for you, Larry," remarked Elmer.

"Then I was right?" asked the other.

"You certainly were, and if the whole of you turn your eyes aways up yonder, perhaps you'll notice a big black-and-white bird come to the surface. It dived just after scolding us for disturbing its fishing excursion."

Following the direction indicated by Elmer's extended finger the scouts all watched eagerly.

"I see something moving just behind that bunch of lily pads," exclaimed one with keen vision.

"There it swims out now, and it's a big water bird, too. Looks like a goose to me," Landy remarked, earnestly.

"That's a loon, fellows!" exclaimed Red.

"Is it, Elmer?" they demanded in a breath.

"Just what it is, and nothing else," replied the acting scout master. "They are very common up in the Great Northwest. And once you've heard their wild laugh you'll never forget it."

"Huh, sounds just like the shout of a crazy man to me," ventured Lil Artha.

"Everybody says that," Elmer declared. "And I

never knew a single fellow who liked to hear a loon call. Some say it's a sign of ill luck to be scolded by a loon."

"Ill luck!" echoed Chatz, once more looking in the direction of the ramshackle old mill.

"But see here," remarked Matty, "tell us about Nat, won't you? When was his queer disappearance first noticed, Elmer?"

"Well, when Lil Artha and myself arrived here we found Toby and Ty throwing stones out in the pond, scaring the little red-marked turtles that were sitting by dozens on every old log and rock, and great big bullfrogs as well."

"Never saw so many whopping big frogs in all my life," declared Ty.

"You see," explained Toby, "we missed Nat, but thought he had just wandered off to look around. Ty and me, why, we felt too tired to explore things till the rest came along."

"Oh, but you could amuse yourselves throwing things into the water, eh?" Matty remarked, with such a vein of sarcasm in his voice that Toby immediately aroused to defend himself.

"'Twa'n't that at all, Matty Eggleston; prove it by Ty here if either of us was afraid to go inside your old haunted mill, was we, Ty?" he exclaimed, with a fine show of righteous indignation.

"Course we wasn't," Ty hastened to declare, with a decided shake of his tousled head. "We walked along the shore till we came to a nice shady place, and then squatted down, meanin' to wait till Elmer showed up. Then I popped a rock at a sassy little turkle, and pretty soon both of us were letting fly."

"When did you miss Nat, and where was he the last you saw him?" asked Matty, who was expected some day to become a lawyer.

"Oh!" answered Toby, "he said he'd hang around the dam here and look into things. You know Nat always did want to pry into everything he saw."

"What then?" Matty went on asking.

"Why, we saw Elmer and Lil Artha coming, and went to meet 'em, that's all," replied Ty.

"Have any of you been inside the mill?"

"Why, no," Toby spoke up. "Elmer and Lil Artha sat down to rest, and you see we expected Nat to pop out on us any minute, so we just didn't say anything about it till they asked."

"And that was just about the time we first heard your voices close by," said Elmer, "so we made up our minds to wait till you joined us, when we could scatter and search."

"Search!" echoed Larry. "Good gracious! do you think Nat can be lost?"

"It doesn't seem possible," admitted Elmer, "but I blew the bugle, and sounded the assembly. If Nat heard that he is scout enough to know it was a command for him to come in—if he could."

"Whew! this is something we didn't expect to run up against—a mystery right in the start," remarked Matty, mopping his face with his big bandana handkerchief, which he wore about his neck, cowboy fashion, with the knot behind.

"You never can tell, suh!" said Chatz, in a solemn

manner; and somehow none of the boys seemed quite as ready to scoff at the Southerner's superstitious belief, as usual.

"But hadn't we better be looking around?" remarked Matty. "Nat may have gone into the old mill, bent on investigating, and some accident have happened to him."

"As what?" queried George, cautiously.

"Oh, well, perhaps he tripped and fell, striking his head as he went down. Then again, a rotten plank might have given way under him, and let him get an ugly fall," Matty replied.

"That sounds reasonable enough," said Elmer, "and now I want some of you to scatter around and see if you can discover any trace of our missing comrade. Red, you get a long pole and poke down in that deep pool, though I feel pretty sure you won't find any sign of him there, because there isn't a mark of blood on the rocks, as there would be if he had fallen from up here on the dam."

The boys looked aghast.

Up to this point perhaps Landy and several others may have indulged in a hope that after all perhaps this might only be a little finish to the remarkable game of fox and hounds which they had been playing.

Indeed, Red and Larry had once or twice even exchanged sly winks. They actually suspected that Elmer had secretly ordered Nat to conceal himself, up among the branches of a tree, perhaps, so as to have the whole party guessing, and running around like a pack of dogs off the scent.

Now the last vague hope in this particular seemed shattered by Elmer's thrilling suggestion.

And more than Red's horrified eyes roved in the direction of the ugly black pool, across the surface of which the foamy white bubbles kept circling constantly, as the surplus water ran over the dam.

"Where will the rest of us look, Elmer?" asked Matty, breaking the awful silence that had gripped them after hearing the scout master's suggestion.

"Any old place," replied Elmer; "only I guess you needn't go far along that farther shore, because Toby and Ty were there where you see that big oak tree."

"They couldn't see the dam from there, could they?" asked Red, quickly.

"No, that's true," answered Toby.

"And so they wouldn't know whether anybody knocked poor Nat over here; or if he went across to the old mill," Red continued.

"Right you are, Red," replied Ty; "but neither did we hear any shout. An old bluejay was screechin' in the woods near us. Yep, a feller might 'a' called out and we not noticed it."

"I want two of you to go with me to the mill," said Elmer.

"Count me for one!" cried some one, instantly; and of course that was the eager Chatz, who would have started a new rebellion had he been debarred that privilege.

"And I'm the second victim," declared Lil Artha, with a grin, but at the same time looking very determined.

"All right," said Elmer; "fall in behind me, and we'll see what the inside of the mill looks like."

CHAPTER IV.

THE SEARCH FOR A CLEW.

FOLLOWING the lead of Elmer, the tall lanky scout and the wiry Southern boy quickly found themselves at the other end of the mill dam.

Lil Artha had cast his eyes about him as he cautiously made his way along. He seemed to be figuring on what chance there might be for an active chap like Nat Scott slipping on one of the wet and moss-covered stones, to go tumbling down toward that suspicious black pool.

Not so Chatz Maxfield.

Apparently he had made up his mind from the start that this strange vanishing of their comrade must have some connection with the mystery of the old mill.

Did they not admit that three separate times people had tried to live there in the dwelling that was part and parcel of the mill; and on every occasion they had given it up as a bad job?

Why?

Well, it seemed to be understood that none of them could stand the sights and sounds which had come to them while under that roof.

People might scoff at such things all they had a mind to, but surely it seemed as if there must be *something* in it.

At any rate, everyone of those three families believed the mill house haunted. And for many years now, no one had had the nerve to occupy the place.

And yet it had once been a paying venture, for the main road was only a few hundred yards away from this lonely, forbidding-looking pond, where the frogs grew so large and the red-marked "turkles," as Ty Collins called them, were so saucy.

"Careful here!" warned Elmer, as they arrived at the runway, where in times past the water was turned on when the mill was to be operated.

The boards were rotting and slimy, and if one made a slip he might get a wet jacket in the sluice, where there was more or less running water.

Elmer held up a hand to hold his comrades back. He seemed to be down on his hands and knees, as though examining something that had just caught his attention.

"What is it?" asked Lil Artha.

"He came this way, all right, boys."

"Do you mean Nat?" questioned Chatz.

"Why, of course," replied the leader.

"How do you know?" continued Chatz.

"I've been following Nat's trail for miles," answered Elmer, "and sure I ought to know what his footprint looks like. Here it is on this clay just beside the sluice. Wait till I cross and see if he made the other side all right."

"He must, because he ain't in the sluiceway," remarked the tall boy.

A minute later and Elmer, who had carefully crossed over, testing each board before trusting his weight on it, called out:

"The marks are here, all right, fellows. Nat did start to look into the old mill. Come over, but be careful. Go

slow, Chatz," he warned again, as the impetuous Southern boy slipped, and might have landed in the slimy sluice only that Lil Artha threw out a hand and clutched him.

They were now almost in the shadow of the deserted mill. It looked gloomy and forbidding to the eyes of at least Elmer and the tall lad, though Chatz may have considered it an object well worth coming a long distance to see.

"Wow! I must get some pictures of this same old ruin while we're up here," said Lil Artha, who carried a little pocket camera along, and was a very clever artist indeed.

"A fine idea," remarked Elmer; "but there are a lot of good people in Hickory Ridge who would think a picture of Munsey's mill very tame and incomplete without the ghost showing in it."

"Ah!" said Chatz, his face aglow.

"Oh, well," Lil Artha went on, "perhaps now I might be lucky enough to tempt that same ghost to pose for me. Anyhow I mean to ask him, if so be we happen to run across his trail."

He looked at Chatz, and then winked one eye humorously at Elmer. But the Southern boy did not deign to take any notice.

"Come, let's go in, fellows," he said, impatiently.

With that the three started for the other side of the mill, where an entrance could most likely be much more easily effected.

Elmer continued to watch the ground, and from the satisfied look on his face Lil Artha felt sure the scout master must be discovering further traces of the missing boy.

Perhaps, after all, they would find Nat hiding inside the mill or the dwelling alongside. Perhaps he had been so busy investigating that he had not noticed their shouts, or the bugle call, for the falling water made quite a little noise.

Or, on the other hand, possibly Nat may have been seized with a sudden desire to tease his comrades in return for many a practical joke of which he had been the victim.

But one of the three was quite firm in his belief that neither of these explanations would turn out to be the true one.

Of course this was Chatz Maxfield, through whose mind had run the conviction that poor Nat Scott must have paid dearly for his temerity in invading the haunted mill.

Yes, Chatz feared that the ghost must have got Nat, though he was afraid to openly proclaim his belief. Fear of ridicule was a weakness of Chatz. It often causes boys to hide their real feelings, and even appear to be much bolder than they naturally are.

Once around the end of the mill and they saw the dwelling attached to it.

Here, too, was the old road, now overgrown with weeds and almost hidden from view. And yet, twenty years ago, in Miller Munsey's time, no doubt farmers daily drove up here with sacks of corn, wheat, or rye, to have the grain delivered to them again in the shape of flour.

"Shall we try to go in by way of the house door?" asked Lil Artha.

"No," replied Elmer, "he went in through that opening where some boards are off the side of the mill. Perhaps we'd better do the same."

"A good idea," remarked Chatz, with the air of one who could not get inside the walls of the mill too speedily to please him.

"Just as you say, Elmer," the lanky scout observed; for having been in the company of the other when the latter was acting as pathfinder to the expedition, Lil Artha was more than ever filled with admiration for his wonderful talents in discovering things supposed to be lost.

So Elmer without further hesitation ducked through the opening, with his two allies keeping close to his heels.

At any rate it was somewhat more restful inside the mill. Those walls, even if now going rapidly into a condition of decay, shut out some of the noise caused by the falling water.

Lil Artha and Chatz both looked about them eagerly, even anxiously, as soon as they found themselves within those walls which had once resounded to the clatter of the grinding.

Their motives, however, were probably as far apart as the two poles; while the long-legged scout hoped, yet dreaded, to see the figure of Nat Scott lying somewhere about, Chatz, on the other hand, was anticipating discovering some token of ghostly visitors.

Nothing rewarded either of them, however. The interior of the mill was of course in a generally dilapidated condition. What remnants of the crushing and milling machinery remained were rusty and broken, as though tramps may have made the place a refuge, and tried to destroy what they could not carry away to sell.

The boards creaked dismally under their tread. More

than that, they were loose in places, and Lil Artha, stepping upon the end of one, might have vanished through a gap in the floor only that his agility saved him.

"Wow, would you see that, now, Elmer!" he exclaimed, his voice sounding strange amidst such singular surroundings.

"You made a neat side step, old fellow," said the one addressed. "Some of us, more clumsy, would have slid down into the cellar."

"Say, now, I wonder—" began Lil Artha, and then stopped to stare at the treacherous plank that formed such a trap.

"You're wondering whether poor old Nat could have taken that tumble?" suggested Elmer.

"That's what I was; what do you think?" asked the tall scout.

"Here, lay hold and we'll soon find out," remarked Elmer, bending over the loose plank.

It required considerable tugging to get it out of the bed it had occupied so long, even if it was fastened by no nails.

Both of them lay down and thrust their faces into the gap.

"Looks pretty dark down there, don't it?" asked Lil Artha, who was secretly shivering with the anticipation of making a grewsome discovery, but who would not have his comrades know the true condition of his nerves for a good deal.

"It sure does that," was Elmer's reply.

"I can just make out something or other lying down

there; it might be an old log, you know, and again, p'raps it ain't."

Lil Artha did not venture to say plainly that he more than half feared lest the object he could see might turn out to be poor Nat Scott. But that was a fact.

"Well, let's find out for sure."

Elmer, while speaking, was taking something from his pocket. It proved to be an old newspaper, from which he tore a sheet, crumpling it up into a ball.

"I generally carry a newspaper along when I go into the woods," he said in explanation. "And it's wonderful what a help it sometimes turns out to be in case you want to start a quick fire. Now for a match."

"I'm sorry now," remarked Lil Artha.

"About what?" asked the scout leader.

"That I didn't think to fetch it along—that new electric hand torch my father gave me on my birthday, you remember, Elmer?"

"Oh," laughed Elmer, "well, who'd ever think we'd have any need of a torch on this hike! Why, it was an altogether daylight affair, and we expected to be back home long before supper time. I even promised Mark to practice battery work some this afternoon. There, now watch when it drops. I hope there's nothing down there to take fire."

"If the old trap did go up in smoke I guess nobody would care much," muttered Lil Artha, as he pressed his face still further into the opening, after Elmer released his fire ball.

The burning paper seemed to alight upon the damp

earthen floor of the cellar. Immediately both boys tried to secure a mental photograph of all there was below them.

"It's only a log!" cried Lil Artha, in a relieved tone of voice, and at the same time betraying more or less disappointment, for perhaps he had made up his mind that they were to be treated to some species of horror.

"You're right," added Elmer, "that's what is it—an old log that has lain there, goodness only knows how long. Nat doesn't seem to have slipped down into the cellar, then, does he?"

"Not that you could notice," replied Lil Artha, and then he added: "but Elmer, didn't you notice something jump when that paper first went down?"

"Well, yes, I did, for a fact, Arthur."

"Any idea what it could be?" persisted the other.

"I hope you're not thinking of that ghost we've heard so much about?" said Elmer.

"Now, that's hardly fair, Elmer; you know I don't take any stock in fairy tales or hobgoblin yarns. But something sure moved."

"A big rat I guess, perhaps a muskrat from the pond above. They sometimes find a burrow leads them to some old, unused cellar."

"But look over there, and you'll see a lot of white bones, Elmer," pursued Lil Artha.

"That's a fact. Some animal must have fallen in here, starved to death, and been eaten up by the rats."

"But, Elmer, are you sure they are animal bones?"

"I noticed the skull, and I think it must have been a large dog," replied Elmer.

Then he and the tall scout scrambled hastily to their feet, for Chatz had suddenly given utterance to an exclamation that seemed to contain much of both surprise and mystification.

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAIL GROWS WARMER.

"SAY, just look up there, fellows!"

Chatz pointed a quivering finger upward as he gave utterance to these words.

Of course both Elmer and the lengthy scout followed his directions, and turned an inquiring gaze toward the dimly seen rafters of the old deserted mill.

"Gee whittaker! what in the dickens are they?" exclaimed Lil Artha, as his startled eyes rested on what seemed to be countless numbers of queer little bunches of dusky gray or brown hair.

They looked for all the world like some farmer's wife's winter collection of herbs, tied up in small packages, and fastened in regular order along the different beams.

"Well, I declare," laughed Elmer.

"You know what they are, Elmer; let us in on it, won't you?" demanded Chatz.

"Nothing whatever to do with the ghost, but all the same often found in haunted houses, church belfries, and old towers. See here."

He stooped and picked up quite a good-sized stone that happened to be lying on the floor.

Elmer was a pitcher on the Hickory Ridge baseball nine, and could hurl a pretty swift ball.

When he shot that stone upward it went like a young cyclone, struck the rafters with a loud bang, clattered around from one beam to another, and finally fell back to the floor with a thud.

This latter sound was certainly not heard by any one of the three scouts, for it was utterly drowned in a tremendous rush as of sturdy wings, and several openings above were filled with some rapidly flying objects.

"Wow, did you ever see the like of that now!" cried Lil Artha.

"What were they, Elmer?" asked Chatz, who had really been too startled to think fairly.

"Bats!" replied the scout leader, promptly.

"I supposed as much," declared Chatz, "and as you remarked just now, they always seem to like a building said to be haunted."

"Well," remarked the tall boy, "sometimes I've had the fellows hint to me that I had bats in *my* belfry; but sure not that many. Why, I reckon there must have been well-nigh a thousand in that gay bunch, Elmer."

"I guess there were, more or less," replied the other.

"And now what?" asked Chatz.

"Let's look further here before we go into the house itself," the scout master made reply.

So they went from one end of the deserted mill to the other, peering into every place where it seemed there might be the slightest hope of discovering their missing comrade.

Elmer even entered a small room off the main floor, and

which had possibly been used as an office when the grist-mill was in business.

"Nothing doing, Elmer?" announced Lil Artha, as the other came out again.

Elmer shook his head in the negative.

"Don't seem to be around here at all," he said.

"Well, let's try the house," suggested Chatz; and it was easily seen from his manner that he was eager to make the change.

After one more careful glance around, as if to make absolutely positive that nothing had been neglected, the scout leader nodded his head.

"Come on, then, fellows," he said.

So the others once more fell in his wake, like true scouts who knew their little lesson full well, and were ready to follow their leader wherever he might choose to go.

Elmer had previously noticed a door leading, as he believed, from the main mill into the cottage that had once been the miller's home.

Toward this he now pushed. He wondered if he would find the door fastened in any way. One touch told him it was not.

And so, without hesitation, Elmer strode across the threshold into what had once been the happy home of a contented miller, until trouble came, and tragedy ended it all.

Like the mill itself the house was fast falling into a state of decay.

It was only a cottage of some four rooms, all on the one floor. The boys passed from one apartment to another

until presently they had been over all the territory comprised within those four walls, so far as they could see.

Both Chatz and Lil Artha uttered exclamations that breathed their disappointment.

Because each of them had failed to discover that upon which he had set his mind he failed to see anything else.

Not so Elmer, who carried out the principle which he was forever holding up before the others as a cardinal virtue which should govern a true scout always.

He noted a number of things that the other two might have passed by, simply because they refused to let their minds work outside of a certain groove.

A frown came upon Elmer's face also, as though he did not wholly like the looks of things.

"Well, he ain't here, that's sure," remarked Lil Artha, shrugging his shoulders in disgust.

"He certainly isn't," muttered Chatz, who, however, was thinking of an entirely different object than the one the tall boy referred to.

"Suppose we give him a shout, and see if there's any result?" suggested Lil Artha.

"Do so, if you like," replied Elmer, in a tone that did not seem to promise much faith in the outcome of this plan.

So the tall boy raised his voice and shouted in his loudest key. A few stray bats that had taken up lodgings in various dark corners of the four rooms went flapping through a broken sash. But beyond that nothing came to pass.

"This sure beats the Dutch," remarked Lil Artha, using his bandana again to wipe off the perspiration that had gathered in beads upon his forehead.

Elmer was looking around again.

"Wonder if there can be a cellar under here?" he remarked, presently.

"I should say yes," replied the tall boy.

"Then there ought to be a trapdoor in the floor somewhere about. Look around and see if you can find it, boys," Elmer continued, himself stepping into the kitchen.

Chatz and the tall boy had hardly gotten well started in their search than they heard Elmer calling.

"He's found it, sure!" observed the Southern lad.

"The luckiest chap ever, take that from me," declared Lil Artha, and then adding hastily: "but then, he always deserves his luck, because he works for it."

Although he did not exactly mean to do so, the one who said that expressed one of the greatest truths known. Deserve good luck, and it will many times knock at your door. Do things worth while, and obtain pleasing results.

Of course they hastened into the kitchen. Here they found Elmer bending over and examining the floor.

"It's a trapdoor, all right," declared Lil Artha, as he noted the dimensions of the cracks that formed an almost perfect square.

"But how to get it up's the question," said Elmer; "for there seems to be no ring in sight. All the same, boys, I reckon this same trap has been used more than a few times lately, from the looks of things."

"Whew! do you really mean it, Elmer?" remarked Chatz, deeply interested.

"Why, you can see for yourself right here that some

sort of tool has been used to pry up the thing," Elmer went on.

"Say, I had a glimpse of an old broken kitchen knife lying over there by the sink. Wonder if that would do the trick? Shall I get it?" remarked Lil Artha.

"If you will," replied Elmer.

The article in question was speedily placed in the hands of the scout master.

"Just the very thing to lift this trap with," he declared, as he started to insert the stout remnant of the blade in the crack.

"Reckon it's been used to do the trick many a time," advanced Chatz.

"I wouldn't wonder," Elmer added.

Using the broken blade as a lever he soon pried the trap up far enough to allow the others a chance to insert their ready fingers. After that it was easily completed, and the square of wooden flooring removed.

"Dark as Egypt," remarked Lil Artha, as he tried to pierce the gloom with his gaze.

Elmer made a move, and Chatz, thinking he intended descending the ladder that led down into the unknown depths, caught his arm.

"I wouldn't do it, Elmer," he said.

"Do what?" asked the other.

"Go down there," continued Chatz. "No telling how deep it may be or what lies there, either. If anybody must go, send me."

"Well," laughed Elmer, "I like your nerve, Chatz. You think something might hurt *me*, but you don't care

so much for yourself. That's like you Southern fellows, though. But make your mind easy, my boy, because just at present I don't think any of us need drop into this hole."

"I'm glad of that," declared the other; "but when you made a move I thought you were going."

"Oh, I only meant to get out my newspaper again, and make another little candle," said Elmer, with a chuckle.

"Well, say what you will, boys," remarked Lil Artha, who had been thrusting his head below the level of the floor and sniffing at a great rate; "I'm glad, too, that we don't just have to drop down this ladder. It's cold and damp down there, and I tell you I don't like the smell."

"There is a queer odor comes up, now that you mention it," admitted Elmer.

At that the eyes of Chatz grew round with wonder and suspense.

"Oh, I hope you don't think—" he began, when Elmer interrupted him.

"Kind of fishy smell, don't you think?" he said.

"Well, since you speak of it I rather guess it is something like that," Lil Artha admitted.

Then Chatz breathed easy again.

"But how could fish ever get in here from the mill pond?" he demanded.

"Give it up; I pass. Ask me something easy," the tall scout hastened to say.

Meanwhile Elmer had, as before, taken a section of the newspaper, crumpled it into a ball, and after that drew out his match box.

"Guess it's safe to drop this down," he remarked. "It seems so damp there can really be no danger of anything taking fire."

"Sure there couldn't," asserted Lil Artha, sturdily. "Let her go, Elmer; and everybody look."

The match crackled, and the resulting flame was instantly applied to the paper ball.

Then Elmer let this drop, after he had made sure it would burn.

Three pairs of very good eyes immediately started in to take a complete inventory of the contents of the little damp cellar under the deserted mill cottage.

For perhaps a full minute the paper ball continued to burn, lighting up the cellar well enough for them to see from wall to wall.

Then the flame dwindled, flickered, and finally went out altogether. Chatz gave a big sigh.

"Well, I declare!" he exclaimed.

"What did you see, Chatz?" asked Elmer.

"Who, me?" exclaimed the Southern boy. "Nothing at all, Elmer," and his manner told plainly that he was both disappointed and disgusted.

"How about you, Arthur?" continued the acting scout master.

"What did I see?" Lil Artha replied, promptly; "four damp-looking stone walls, a hard earth floor, and a few old boxes lying around, but not another blessed thing."

Something about Elmer's manner caught his attention and aroused his suspicions.

"See here, did *you* discover anything?" he demanded.

"Well," replied Elmer, "I can't say that the evidence is so plain a fellow who runs may read; but from a number of things I've seen since coming here to the Munsey mill pond I've about made up my mind this place isn't quite as deserted as people seem to believe."

"Do you mean, Elmer," cried Lil Artha, excitedly, "that tramps or some more yeggmen, like those fellows we met with up at McGraw's lumber camp, have squatted here in this haunted house?"

"Something like that," replied the other, steadily, "though I don't believe they dare spend a night under this roof. There's no sign of that."

"But what would they kidnap our chum for?" demanded the excited tall scout.

"I don't know for certain, but we're going to find out pretty soon," said Elmer, with a determined look.

CHAPTER VI.

HUNTING FOR THE MISSING SCOUT.

"HONEST, now, Elmer, do you really believe that?" asked Chatz Maxfield, after staring at the scout master in a puzzled manner for half a dozen seconds.

"It looks so, on the face of it," replied the other.

"But plague take it," argued Chatz, "for the life of me I just can't understand, suh, what those fellows would want to make a prisoner of poor Nat for. In all our troop he's about the most harmless scout, except perhaps Jasper

Merriweather. Nat is strong as an ox, but he wouldn't hurt a fly if he could help it."

"That's so," echoed Lil Artha. "I've seen him walk around so as not to step on a harmless little snake on the road. And it wasn't because he was afraid of snakes, either. Remember he killed that fierce big copperhead last summer, after the other fellows had skipped out?"

"There's one chance, though," Elmer went on, "that after all Nat may be hiding."

"But he knows the sound of the bugle, and what penalty follows disobedience on the part of a scout," declared Lil Artha.

"That's true enough, fellows," Elmer said, as if he himself might be trying to see through a haze; "but perhaps Nat finds himself in a position where he can't answer us without betraying himself to these unknown men."

Again did Chatz and the tall scout look at each other helplessly. And judging from the way they shook their heads, the puzzle was evidently too deep for them.

"Say, Elmer, you manage to get on to these things in a way to beat the band; could you give a guess now about how many men there are holding out around this old haunted mill?"

Lil Artha asked this in good faith. He had come to believe, with most of his comrades, that Elmer Chenowith was next door to a wizard. Of course they realized that his knowledge was at all times founded on facts and common sense; yet this did not detract from the wonder of his accomplishments.

"I think there are three at least, perhaps four or five in the lot," Elmer replied.

"Whew! that's a healthy crowd of toughs, now, to run up against!" remarked Lil Artha.

"And what do you propose doing, suh, if I may make so bold as to ask?"

Chatz was usually a very dignified fellow, especially when coming in contact with one who, according to recognized scout law, must be considered his superior officer, and as such entitled to respect.

"First of all, perhaps we'd better go outside," the other replied.

"And tell the rest of the boys what we've found—or rather what we didn't find," remarked Lil Artha.

"Yes. There doesn't seem to be anything more to poke into here; for I'm dead certain those men, whoever they are, don't make their headquarters in either the mill or the cottage."

"You mean they don't sleep here; is that it, suh?" inquired Chatz.

"That covers the ground," Elmer answered.

"But they *do* come in here sometimes, while the sun is shining," persisted Chatz.

"I have seen the marks of many heavy hobnailed shoes in the dust of this place; and some of the prints were very fresh," came the answer.

"Then if they're wanting in the nerve to sleep under this roof, when it would be so handy, in a thunderstorm like we had the other day, for instance, that looks as if they believed some in the ghost story, don't it, Elmer?"

"Why, I suppose it does, Chatz."

"All right. I'm not saying anything more," remarked the Southern boy, with a look of conviction on his dark face, "but I only hope we run across one or more of these mysterious unknowns while we're up at Munsey's mill."

"Listen to that, would you, Elmer! I declare if he don't mean to interview these fellows, and find out what they've gone and seen here in the night time!" and Lil Artha chuckled as he said this.

"All right," remarked Chatz. "There are a lot of things I've always wanted to know, and I'd be a silly to let the chance slip past me."

"Hey, how about this bally old trapdoor, Elmer?" demanded Lil Artha.

"We'd better put it back where it belongs," replied the scout leader.

"I reckon you're right, suh," observed Chatz. "If some one came in here, walking in the dark, he might take a nasty header down this hole."

"Say, supposing your ghost did that," remarked the tall scout, as he helped lift the wooden square back to where it belonged; "why, you could do better than asking questions of an outsider, because, Chatz, you might interview your old ghost himself."

The other drew himself up.

"Kindly omit calling it *my* ghost, if you please, suh," he said, stiffly. "I don't pretend to have any claim on the object in question—if there really is such a thing. I'm only wanting to know; and I come from South Carolina, suh, not Missouri."

Elmer, after one last glance around the kitchen, was heading for the other room where an exit could be made.

And it was almost ludicrous to see with what haste the other two followed after; just as if neither of them cared to be left alone inside the walls of the haunted mill cottage.

Once outside, they found several of their comrades clustered near by, evidently awaiting them. That curiosity was rapidly reaching fever heat it was easy to see from the anxious looks cast upon those who had been investigating the interior of the buildings.

No doubt every fellow had meanwhile been industriously engaged in ransacking his brain to remember all he had ever heard concerning Munsey's mill, and the troublesome spirit that had frightened away three separate tenants in years gone by.

They were rather a demoralized trio of boys who welcomed the coming of Elmer, Chatz, and Lil Artha.

"Find any signs of Nat?" asked one.

"Hope the plagued old ghost didn't get him," another ventured.

"Tell us all about it, Elmer?" asked the third member of the little bunch.

But the scout leader instead raised the bugle to his lips and sounded the assembly call.

Voices were heard, and immediately the others came hurrying to the spot. Landy was the last to arrive, and he came up puffing and blowing as though he might have been at some little distance when he heard the summons for gathering.

"Listen!" said Elmer, raising his hand, and immediately the confused chattering of many boyish tongues ceased.

This enabled them to hear distant shouts from the southeast, as though newcomers might be approaching the mill over about the same course as that they had pursued.

"Mark Cummings and the last detachment!" declared Matty.

"Hurrah! six more good fellows to do battle with the outlaws of the haunted mill!" exclaimed Red; at which some of the others gasped in astonishment, and exchanged uneasy glances.

"Better wait till they all get here, boys," said Elmer, "and then I'll tell you what we've found out, also what we suspect."

Chatz and Lil Artha could not but notice how particular Elmer was to use the plural pronoun. But then, that was always his way. Whatever faults the boy may have had—and the best of fellows comes far from being perfect—selfishness was not one of them. Impatiently they waited for the coming of the six scouts forming the last detachment. This would increase their rollcall to sixteen, lacking only *one* of the number that had started out.

Presently a sight of khaki uniforms among the trees announced their near approach.

As the two wings of the Hickory Ridge Troop of Boy Scouts came together, there was a general exchange of badinage.

The newcomers had an intense desire to learn whether

their interpretation of the messages might excel that of the first detachment.

But in the midst of the questioning, the startling news concerning Nat Scott's mysterious vanishing began to circulate among the newcomers.

This put a quietus on all business, and the entire troop clustered around Elmer, begging to know what it could mean.

So the scout master, understanding just how his comrades must feel, started in to explain, as far as lay in his power.

First of all, for the benefit of the newcomers, he told of how Nat's disappearance was brought to his attention by Toby and Ty, just before the coming of Matty and his group of scouts.

Then he quickly related what he and Chatz and Lil Artha had done in the deserted buildings close by.

Presently the story was finished, and some of the boys, who had listened with hearts beating much faster than their wont, took the first decent breath in five minutes.

Of course questions poured in on Elmer as thick as hail stones during a summer storm. Finding it utterly impossible to answer a quarter of these intelligently, and make any kind of progress, Elmer called for silence.

"It stands to reason, fellows," he remarked, when the last whisper had died away, "that we've got to have system about this thing if we expect to do any business. Am I right?"

"Yes, yes," came from every scout; for boys though they were, they recognized the wisdom of what he said.

"All right, then," Elmer went on. "I'm going to divide

the troop into three searching parties. We must scour the neighborhood and see if we can find any sign of where these unknown men sleep, for there isn't any trace of their staying in cottage or mill at night time."

"We understand what you mean, Elmer. How shall we divide up?" asked Mark.

"You keep your detachment as it was, intact, Mark," came the reply; "and Matty, you have your six to back you. Lil Artha, Toby, and Ty will fall in with me, and make the third party."

"All right, suh, we understand," called out Chatz.

But he, as well as many others of the boys, showed in their faces that they envied the good luck of the three fellows who had been picked out to form Elmer's smaller group.

"What are our duties to be?" asked Mark, who, having only recently arrived, and being staggered by the sudden nature of the intelligence, had as yet not fully grasped the situation.

"First of all, let every scout who has not already done so, pick up a stout club in the woods, as he passes along," said Elmer.

"Like this, for instance," remarked Jack Armitage, flourishing a husky specimen that would pass muster for an Irishman's shillalah.

"Or this!" cried Red, whose cudgel was as long as a walking stick, and almost as thick through as his wrist.

"Suit yourselves about that, boys," continued the scout master, "only don't be in a hurry to use them as weapons until you have the order. Now, each detachment must

keep close enough together so that the members may communicate by means of patrol calls—the cry of the wolf, the slap of a beaver's tail as he beats the water to call his mate, or the scream of the eagle."

"We know, Elmer; what else?" asked Matty.

"All the while you will keep on the lookout for some sign of the enemy. The scout who discovers anything that he thinks would have a bearing on the solving of the puzzle must immediately summon his leader. This he can do by the whistle which all of you know, as it has been used before."

"Is that all, Elmer?" asked Mark.

"If the matter seems very important to the mind of the leader, let him give the assembly call very loud on his whistle. Upon hearing that, every scout is expected to give up hunting on his own account, and head in toward the place the signal comes from. Is that plain to every fellow?"

A chorus of assent answered him.

"That's all, then, fellows," Elmer went on. "Do your duty, every scout. We've got to find our comrade, and we've got to get him out of the hands of these men, whoever they may turn out to be."

"If they've hurt our Nat, it's going to be a bad day for them, that's all," blustered Red, as he pounded his club against an inoffensive stone.

"Now, start out, fellows, and let's see who'll be the lucky one to discover this hidden shack where these men must stay nights," Elmer concluded.

"Say, hold on here! Is *that* what you're looking for—

a hidden shack? Why, I can take you to one right now," called out a voice.

The speaker was Landy Smith.

CHAPTER VII.

THE AMBITION OF LANDY.

EVERY boy became suddenly stationary when this surprising intelligence broke from the lips of the new member, who, like three others in the troop, did not wear a khaki uniform.

Elmer had several times let his eye fall on the stout boy, as though trying to guess what his manner indicated.

He had seen Landy come up last of all, panting so for breath that not one word had he spoken while the scout master was explaining things.

Landy was not only a tenderfoot scout, but he had in a number of ways proven his right to the title of greenhorn.

Imagine, then, the utter amazement of his comrades when he so coolly declared that he might be able to lead them to a hidden shack.

Elmer, if surprised, did not allow this fact to interfere with his plain duty.

"Come here, Landy," he said, and the stout new recruit hastened to do as he was ordered.

Of course Landy would not have been human, and a

boy, had he been able to repress the grin that forced itself upon his rosy countenance.

Perhaps he remembered saying not so very long ago that the time might come when he would be able to prove his ability to carry the name of a scout.

Of course at the time Landy could never have even dreamed the opening would arrive so soon. That made it all the more welcome. Perhaps now, some of the fellows who loved to tease him, and say that he was too fat and slow-witted to ever be a shining success in the Hickory Hill troop, would change their tune.

Landy's hour had come. He was in the lime light, and occupied the center of the stage.

Mindful of the respect due his superior officer, Landy saluted as he clicked his heels together, and stood at attention before the scout master.

"You say you can show us where there is a hidden shack or cabin, do you, Number Eight?"

Elmer frequently addressed the boys by the number they held in their patrol, and as Landy was the last one admitted into the Wolf Patrol he went as Number Eight.

"Yes, sir," the tenderfoot replied, quite enjoying the fact that fifteen pairs of eager eyes were riveted upon him right then and there.

Landy looked redder than usual, but for all that he seemed able to command his voice, for it did not tremble a particle.

"You arrived later than the rest when I sounded the assembly on the bugle," went on Elmer; "was that because you were some little distance away?"

"Yes, sir, I was just going to peek in through the window of that funny little cabin I found when I heard the call. But I didn't look, sir, because I knew *a scout's duty was to obey!*"

"Hear, hear!" said Red, in a low voice.

"That was well done, Number Eight," Elmer continued, "and I hope you will always keep your duty before your mind. Do you think you could lead us to where you saw that hidden shack?"

"I expect I can, sir; anyhow, I'm ready to try," Landy promptly answered.

Several of the scouts exchanged nods and glances. Why, they had never before dreamed that the fat boy had so much business about him. He acted just as might one who had been a member of the troop a whole month, instead of but a few days.

It was plain to be seen that his becoming a scout was going to be the making of Philander Smith. Already there was a great change in his ways. He was throwing off his weaknesses, and beginning to think for himself.

"All right," said Elmer; "suppose you come with me, then, Number Eight, and try to go back over your own trail. That might be the quickest way to get there."

"But how about us, Mr. Scout Master; do we keep up the formation as arranged?" asked Mark.

"No, for the present that is all off," Elmer replied, "the whole of you fall in behind; and don't forget to keep an eye out for your sticks. But no talking above a whisper, remember. This may turn out to be serious business."

The scouts already realized this. Still his words of caution entailing silence were well placed, for boys as a rule do love to chatter.

And so the whole troop started off, with Elmer and Landy in the lead, the latter hardly knowing whether to be tickled at the attention he was receiving, or worried because he presently began to doubt his ability to "deliver the goods."

Strange how all sections of the woods look alike to a fellow who is a novice in the art of picking his way. Landy had imagined that he was just soaking in valuable information while following the lead of Matty or Elmer. But when the crisis arose, and he found himself placed upon his own responsibility, he lost confidence.

Pretty soon Elmer guessed the truth, and that their guide was getting what Lil Artha would call "wabbly." This was when he took them twice to the same spot and then looked pained.

"Up a stump, fellows," chuckled Larry, who had perhaps himself felt a little twinge of jealousy because a greenhorn had so suddenly leaped into the front when older and more experienced scouts had been unable to score.

But Elmer was not at all dismayed. In fact, to tell the actual truth, he had rather expected that the new beginner might find more or less trouble in carrying out his orders.

"Getting mixed up some, are you, Number Eight?" he demanded, as Landy scratched his head and then tenderly caressed quite a good-sized lump they now saw he had on his forehead.

"Well, I'm sorry to say, sir, I seem to be a little confused," admitted the fat boy; "but then perhaps that

ain't to be wondered at if you knew just how hard I bumped into that crooked tree yonder."

"With your head?" asked Elmer.

"Yes, sir," replied Landy; "you see I was trying to hurry, when my foot caught in a vine and I went ker-slam right against that tree. Say, but I saw ten million stars right then! and that's no exaggeration, sir."

"Why do you say it was this tree, Number Eight?" the young disciple of woodcraft continued.

"Well, it was impressed pretty forcibly on my head, and my mind, too, sir," grinned Landy, "and perhaps, if you looked, you could find the dent I bet I made when I struck."

Some of the boys snickered at this. Not so Elmer, who seemed to feel he had quite a serious proposition on his hands, and that the others had a right to look to him to untangle the knot.

"I'll soon find out," he said, and then turning to the crowd he added: "keep back and give me a chance to see if Landy is right."

"He's after the trail, that's what," said one of the scouts, as they saw Elmer advance to where the crooked tree pointed out by the fat recruit stood, and bend down at its base.

Every eye remained glued on the young scout master. Not a word more was said, for they knew that explanation of Elmer's movements must be the right one.

No sooner had Elmer dropped to his knees than he felt a thrill of pleasure.

"It's here, sure enough!" he muttered, as his eye dis-

covered the torn turf where Landy's toes must have dragged when he fell.

And with the knowledge of trailing which he possessed, it must surely prove an easy task to follow those plain tracks. Landy knew nothing at all concerning the art of hiding a trail, and which the bearer of the wampum belt and his companion had tried their best to put into practice with the idea of deceiving the pathfinder who came behind.

When Landy put his foot down it was with considerable emphasis. Consequently, any one of the more experienced scouts would have been equal to the task of following that trail backward.

As Elmer moved away he made a swift, beckoning movement with his arm. This the boys interpreted as a command or invitation to "get a move on," as Lil Artha put it, and follow after their leader.

So the troop moved onward, and more than one fellow's teeth came together with a click as he grasped his cudgel tighter in his hand, and resolved to give a good account of himself should it become necessary to do something violent.

True, the rules counseled peaceful victories; but there may be times when it becomes absolutely necessary for Boy Scouts to show that they have good red blood in their veins.

And most of those present were of the opinion that the present occasion promised to be just such a crisis that called for strenuous treatment.

Their companion, Nat Scott, had mysteriously disap-

peared, and they had good reason to believe that he had fallen into the hands of these unknown men who made the vicinity of Munsey's mill their secret headquarters.

Why they should seize upon Nat, and what object they could have in holding him a prisoner, were questions no one could answer, as yet. But they meant to know, and that before long.

Now and then some fellow would step aside without a word, and possess himself of some attractive club that had caught his eye while passing.

Evidently none of them had forgotten the injunction of their leader to arm themselves. And really it was strange how much comfort even a stout walking stick could give a fellow on an occasion of this sort, when unseen and unknown perils hovered about them.

Meanwhile Elmer stuck to his task. Indeed, it was an easy one for so experienced a tracker and pathfinder, and he did not hurry along faster simply because he wanted a little time to collect his own thoughts, and decide what ought to be done.

When Landy so obediently gave up his investigation, and sought to rejoin the balance of the troop when the bugle sounded, he managed to make what proved to be a "bee line" through the woods. Even trees that were in the way could not stop him with impunity, as he had proven when he collided with that crooked one.

This made Elmer's job still easier. And as he advanced farther into the woods he marveled first at the rashness of Landy in wandering so far away; and second at the ability he displayed in getting safely back to the shore of the pond.

Elmer was keeping one eye out ahead as he moved along. Of course he anticipated coming upon the concealed shack at any moment now. When he saw an unusually large cluster of high bushes and undergrowth he felt positive that he must be almost in touch with the place.

What kind of reception might they expect? If these men, whom none of them had as yet even seen, turned out to be rascals who were hiding from justice, and who suspected them of being a posse sent out to round up the tramp thieves, their manner of greeting might prove to be anything but friendly.

Could they have one or more fierce dogs among them? Elmer had not seen the first trace of a dog anywhere around, but this could hardly be accepted as positive evidence that there were none.

Frequently such men make it a point to possess canine companions. And these are invariably of some species fond of the spirit of battle.

It was partly the expectation of running across such four-footed enemies that had influenced Elmer to have the boys arm themselves with clubs. He knew what a power for good a stout cudgel may prove under such conditions.

Looking closely he had to confess that he could see no sign of life about that clump of bushes.

And yet the trail led directly from it; and as if to sweep away his last remaining doubt he now discovered a second series of fresh tracks leading straight *toward* the spot.

Besides, here was a regular path, beaten down by many feet, and which headed in the quarter Elmer knew the big pond lay.

That settled it.

Elmer waited for the balance of the troop to come up. Everyone's gaze was fastened on him. Eyes flashed more brightly than usual, and some of the boys naturally showed their nervousness by the way they kept their cudgels moving.

"Is that the place, Landy, where you saw the shack?" he demanded.

Landy had known it was for more than a full minute past, but he remembered that a scout on duty must wait to be asked before volunteering any information.

"Yes, sir," he replied, "that is the place."

"Spread out a little, fellows," said Elmer, quietly, "and advance slowly. Everyone be ready to give a good account of himself if they rush any dogs on us. Forward now!"

And silently the sixteen scouts, spread out somewhat like an open fan, started to advance upon the strange dense thicket in which Landy had seen a shack.

CHAPTER VIII.

READING THE SIGNS.

"HALT!"

At the command the scouts came to a stop. They had been gradually concentrating as they pushed forward, so that when this halt was made they formed half a circle, and each fellow was almost touching elbows with the next in line.

Just before them, even though pretty well concealed by

the foliage of the bushes, they could make out what appeared to be a rough shack.

No other name would apply, for it was clumsily built out of odds and ends of boards, secured at the mill, no doubt, together with sods, a heap of stones, some mud that had hardened until it resembled mortar; and, finally, a roof thatched with straw, much after the style the boys had seen in pictures of foreign cottages in Switzerland, France, and Italy.

"Say," observed Red, who found it unusually hard to keep from expressing his views, "I don't believe there are any kiyi dogs around here, fellows."

"Don't seem like it," remarked another, doubtless breathing a sigh of relief at the improved prospect.

"Sure we'd have heard them give tongue," observed Toby, advancing boldly to look in through the opening at the side of the shack, and which doubtless served the purpose of a window.

"Careful, Toby; go slow," called out Elmer; for there could be no telling what sort of a storm the appearance of the boys in khaki might raise within the shanty.

An intense silence followed. Every fellow could feel his heart pounding against his ribs like a trip hammer, and he wondered whether the sound were loud enough to betray his nervous frame of mind to his companions, never dreaming that they were all in the same box.

A red squirrel in a tree overhead, that had been observing all these doings with round-eyed wonder, began to chatter and scold. A little striped chipmunk sat up on a neighboring stump and took note.

"Nobody home, fellers," called out Toby, after he had apparently stared in through that opening for more than a full minute.

Some of the scouts looked relieved; others frowned as if disgusted. This sort of thing might be all very well, but it did not seem to be taking them any closer to the rescue of their comrade, or clearing up any of the dark fog of mystery that hung like a wet blanket between themselves and the solution.

Elmer immediately strode forward. By following the well-defined path he was able to find himself at what was plainly the rude door of the shack.

Upon this he knocked sharply. There came no answer, and even the keenest ears among the scouts failed to catch the slightest sound following this summons.

"Try it once more, Elmer," advised cautious Mark.

Again the tattoo sounded, but as before it produced no results. So Elmer opened the door, which he saw had been fashioned in the rudest way from boards, and hung upon strap hinges.

As he pushed the door aside, every scout held his breath and gripped his stick expectantly. But nothing happened. No string of rough men came bustling forth, demanding in coarse language what the boys meant by bothering them.

It looked as though Toby must have struck the right key when he so confidently declared there was nobody at home.

So Elmer entered, with some of the bolder among the scouts at his heels. The balance contented themselves in pressing around the door and window, and taking it out in looking.

Just as he had expected, Elmer found the interior of the shack pretty gloomy. Under the best of conditions very little daylight could find a way through such small openings, and these were now almost filled by the bodies of the curious scouts. But this was a matter easily remedied. Elmer had his matchsafe ready in his hands, and his first act was to strike a light.

As soon as the match flamed up he cast one quick look around the interior. This assured him that there were certainly no low-browed men crouching in the corners, and ready to hurl themselves upon the young invaders.

The next thing Elmer did was also a very natural move. He saw a candle in a bottle, standing on an upturned box, and stepping forward he applied his match to the waiting wick.

Then he looked around again.

There could be no doubt about this shack having been recently used as sleeping quarters by a number of men.

Several heaps of straw told where they lay, and Elmer counted four of these. Then there were a few bits of old clothing hanging from nails, a pair of heavy shoes, a frying pan, a kettle in which coffee might have been made, some broken bread, part of a ham, and some ears of corn; this last possibly stolen from the field of some farmer.

It looked like a tramp's paradise, but the puzzle was, what would tramps be doing so far away from all customary sources of supply?

Elmer sniffed the atmosphere, which was both heavy and far from pleasant. And Lil Artha, who had pressed into

the shack, hot upon the heels of his chief, took note of his significant action.

"I should say yes, it's rank as all get out," he remarked, holding his nose between a finger and thumb. "Even beats that fishy smell we struck when we looked down into the cellar at the cottage. Whew!"

Others expressed themselves about as strongly, and little Jasper Merriweather, who had unwisely pushed into the shack, found it necessary to hurry out again, white of face and gasping.

But Elmer had conceived an idea, even while suffering from the unpleasant odor of the place.

"Howling cats!" exclaimed Lil Artha, "I don't see how you can stand it, Elmer. Talk to me about tramps, and the way they hate water, here's the rank evidence of it. Wow, ain't I sorry for poor Nat if he's got to associate with this hobo crowd for long!"

"But how do we know they're hoboes?" asked Elmer, turning on the tall scout.

"Hey? What's that?" exclaimed Lil Artha, actually so surprised that he neglected to hold that firm grip on his nose any longer.

"What makes you so sure they're tramps?" pursued the scout master.

"Why, goodness gracious alive, Elmer, you don't mean to say you doubt that now?" cried the tall boy, sweeping his hand around as though to draw attention to the various articles that seemed to stamp that theory a positive fact.

"Seeing these things here is what makes me question that idea very much," began Elmer; and then he picked

up one of the old shoes, to hold it at arm's length. "Look at that, fellows; never made in this country, and you know it. Hobnails such as no one but foreigners use on their shoes."

"Well, I declare; I guess Elmer's right!" exclaimed Red.

"He certainly is, suh, take my word foh it," was the way Chatz expressed himself.

"Now look here, whoever saw a tramp's nest with anything like this in it?" and Elmer picked up a string of beads, evidently a rosary, that must have been overlooked in a hasty flight.

"Whew, that's going some!" ejaculated Phil Dale who, with his cousin Landy, happened to be in the shack eager to see all that went on.

"Perhaps he can even tell us what brand of foreigners these fellows are," remarked Landy, who was beginning to look upon Elmer pretty much in the light of a wizard.

"Oh, that ought to be easy, fellows," said the young scout master, as he reached up and took down a worn letter his quick eye had noticed stuck in a crack.

Every eye was immediately focused on the scout master. They knew his reasoning powers of old, and expected that Elmer would quickly put them on the right track now.

Indeed, hardly had the latter glanced at the well-worn letter he held than he smiled.

"What is it?" asked Red, impatiently.

"Yes, tell us what you've found out, Elmer," said Lil Artha.

"Why, look here at the name. As near as I can make out it's Giuseppi Caroni," replied the other.

"Wow, that is plain enough!" exclaimed Red.

"Sure Italiano," echoed the tall scout.

"Just as I thought," replied Elmer.

"But you can prove it," remarked Chatz.

"That's easy enough," added Dr. Ted, "the thtamp ought to be enough, you thee."

"And if it isn't, fellows, here's the postmark as plain as anything—Naples, Italy," continued Elmer.

"Naples, hey?" remarked Lil Artha. "Say, I was just reading about Naples the other day, and it said that next to the island of Sicily we get more of our Black Hand crowd from there than any other part of Garibaldi's old land."

A gasp seemed to go the complete rounds of all the khaki-clad warriors who thronged that mysterious little shack.

"Black Hand, you say, Lil Artha?" exclaimed Red.

"Yes, and anarchists, too; the kind that blow up the kings and queens of the Old World. The kind that abduct people so as to make their rich relatives whack up a big ransom."

"Oh!"

Some of the boys looked a little timid, and glanced around apprehensively, as though they anticipated seeing a whole bunch of fierce-looking dynamite users rise up around them.

Others shut their teeth together harder than ever, and these more determined fellows, it might be noticed, tightened the grip they had upon their sticks.

All eyes were turned again upon Elmer, who had listened to these remarks with an amused smile.

"Hold on your horses, boys," he said, raising his hand just then to still the rising dispute.

"Shut up, everybody; Elmer's got something more to tell us," Lil Artha cried.

The hubbub died away, and an eagerness to listen took its place; for every one of them was anxious to pick up points concerning the clever way their leader figured things out.

It was an important part of a scout's duty to learn how to read signs, not only when following a trail, but at all times.

And especially valuable would this qualification become when confronted by a baffling mystery such as the Hickory Ridge troop was now up against.

"Those who occupied this shack were four in number," Elmer began.

"How did you find that out?" asked Red.

"By the various tracks. So far as I could see there were just four separate kinds leading up to this place, and each one different."

"Hurrah! I tell you, fellows, that's the way to learn things. Elmer knows how to do it," cried Lil Artha.

Without even smiling at the implied compliment Elmer went on:

"Two of them wore shoes with hobnails just as you see on this old cast-off shoe here. A third one had on American-made brogans, and I expect they hurt him some, too, because he was limping as he walked. He is undoubtedly the chap who used to own these old foreign-made gunboats."

"Hold on a minute, please, Elmer," pleaded Red.

"All right. You want to ask me something, and I think I know what it is," remarked the other.

"You say this fellow's new shoes hurt him, and made him limp; please tell us how in the wide world you ever found that out?" Red continued.

"Well, it might be possible that the fellow was always lame, but his tracks show plainly that he limped. Something was wrong with his left leg or foot, because the toe dug deeply into the ground."

"Well, I declare is that dead-sure evidence, Elmer?" demanded the astounded tenderfoot, Landy, who was listening with all his might to these intensely interesting facts as brought out by the scout master.

"Try it yourself sometime, Landy," remarked Elmer. "Pick out a nice piece of ground where the marks will show plainly. Limp as naturally as you can with the left leg. Then go back and examine the trail. You will find that not only does the left foot dig deeper at the toe than the right one, but that same toe drags a little over the ground as you bring the left foot forward each time."

"Just listen to that, will you!" remarked Red, "but I know Elmer is right. I can grab the principle of the thing."

"But how about the fourth one, Elmer; seems to me you've been holding back something there, that you mean to spring on us," said Lil Artha.

"Well, I have," remarked the other, quickly. "This fourth track was smaller than the others, and the person also wore American-made shoes."

"Ah, a boy, ch?" asked Red.

The scout master shook his head.

"Wrong that time, my boy. You'll have to guess again, I reckon," he said.

"Was it a woman, Elmer?" demanded Lil Artha.

"Just what it was—an Italian woman, squatty like most of her race; and I should say between fifty-five and sixty years of age," Elmer replied, soberly.

CHAPTER IX.

SETTING A TRAP.

At that there arose new exclamations of wonder, as well as of disbelief.

"Oh, come off, now," remarked Red, quite forgetting in his amazement the respect supposed to be shown for an acting scout master, even though in the private walks of life he might only be a fellow playmate; "you can't expect us to swallow that, now, Elmer."

"Do you mean about the woman's height, or her age?" asked the other, calmly.

"Why—er—both I guess," faltered Red, weakening as he saw the positive front of the other.

"Stop and think, did you ever see any other than a short, squatty woman among the Italian laborers? And I reckon nobody else ever did. They carry heavy burdens on their heads, and people say that's one reason they're always dumpy," Elmer began.

"He's right, fellows," broke out Landy; "why, I've seen a dago woman carrying a mattress, a stove and some chairs on her head all at the same time. Gee, looked like a two-legged moving van:"

"But see here, you notice a shelf with a few things on it, some hairpins among the lot. It was built unusually low, so *she* could reach it. And what's this you see here, fellows? A piece of broken looking glass fastened to the wall. Notice how low down it is? No man ever used that glass, you can depend on it; and the woman who did was surely small, wasn't she now?"

"A regular sawed-off," assented Lil Artha, emphatically.

"Elmer's sure proved his point there, fellows," declared Red Huggins, grinning.

"But what makes you think the woman is old, Elmer?" asked Landy, curiously.

"That's so; how in the wide world could you know such a thing without ever seeing her?" demanded Toby.

"Nothing could be easier, fellows; see here!"

As Elmer spoke he reached out his hand and took something off the low shelf.

Those in the room crowded around, fairly wild to follow out the clever deduction of their young leader.

"Why, it's a comb," cried one.

"Only an old broken comb," echoed another, with a shade of uncertainty in his voice.

"What is there about that to tell you, Elmer?" queried Red, staring first at the article in question, and then at the smiling scout master.

"I know," burst out Matty just then.

"Tell us," pleaded several.

"Yes, throw some light on the dark mystery," added Lil Artha, "because to the untrained eye it's all as gloomy as the inside of my pocket. A comb, and how to tell a woman's age from that! Well, I own up beat."

"Why, it's as easy as falling off a log, or coming down in a smash when you're first learning how to fly," Matty began.

"Hey, don't you drag me into this thing," spoke up Toby, whose many experiments as a new beginner in the science of aviation had usually ended in his enjoying a disastrous tumble.

"All you have to do is to examine the comb," Matty went on. "Then you'll find that it holds a few long hairs, and, fellows, just see how gray they are, will you?"

"Well, what d'ye think of that?" burst out Red. "And I guess we're a lot of chumps, fellows, not to have seen through it before."

"Would a woman be among anarchists, Elmer?" demanded Toby.

"Oh, I don't know," came the reply. "Perhaps so, though not as a usual thing. But understand that I haven't said I agreed with you altogether, when you gave such a hard name to these people."

"Then you don't count 'em as Black Hand kidnapers, who expect to raise a bully good sum by holding our pard, Nat Scott, for ransom?" demanded Red.

"I've seen nothing to tell me that's the way matters stand," Elmer commenced saying, "and several things seem to say just the opposite. The presence of the woman, and

her having such an article as this precious string of beads don't seem to go along with such a thing as a band of rascals."

"Yes, yes, go on, Elmer," several called out.

"We haven't found the slightest sign of a bomb factory here, or even a book teaching how to bring about a revolution. These things make me believe that these three men and a woman may not be such terribly hard cases after all."

"But you believe they've got our chum, and are holding him a prisoner, don't you, Elmer?" asked Matty.

"I do believe it," Elmer went on. "In fact I know it, because if you look back of that empty box yonder, which they use for a table, you'll find a hat—Nat's hat, if I'm not mistaken."

A rush was made for the box in question, and there followed a confusion of tongues, as half a dozen fellows tried to talk at once.

"You found a hat, didn't you?" demanded Elmer.

"We sure did, and here she is," cried Red, holding up the article in question.

"It looks like a scout's regulation hat?" Elmer remarked.

"Which nobody could deny," sang Lil Artha.

"And as every scout present has his own hat on his head right now, it stands to reason this couldn't belong to any of us, eh, fellows?"

"To clinch the matter, Elmer," observed Matty, "if you look inside the hat you'll find two little silver letters fastened there. The N. S. stands for Nathaniel Scott."

"Well, that point seems proved. Nat was here. Perhaps in wandering about he struck this place. But the indications are he was captured first, and brought to this shack."

"But," said hasty Red, interrupting Elmer, "if you admit that these Italians have made our pard a prisoner, how can you say they are not bad men, thieves wanted by the officers of the law, even if not anarchists?"

"Some things I can only guess at, without being able to explain my conviction. But, honestly, fellows, I hardly think these people are as bad as you make out. I know blackmail is practiced over in Italy a lot. And that one of the favorite ways to get money is to kidnap the son or daughter of a rich man, and demand a heavy ransom. But in this case they would hardly pick Nat Scott for a pigeon to be plucked. His father is only a schoolmaster. There are others here who would seem to be more attractive bait."

"Hear, hear!" cried Lil Artha, casting a meaning look in the direction of Larry Billings, whose father, being a banker, was reckoned the richest man in all Hickory Ridge.

"But ain't we wasting a heap of time here?" asked Red, impatient as always to be doing something.

"That's just what I was saying to Ted here," declared Larry, whom the meaning glance of Lil Artha had plainly rendered uneasy.

"You may think so," remarked Elmer, "but this is a case of the more haste the less speed. I reckon it's wise for us to make sure about the character of these Italians before we go to chasing after them. They're an excitable

lot, you know, and we might bring on trouble that could just as well be avoided if we went slow."

Matty looked at his leader sharply.

"Say, see here, Elmer," he remarked, "you know, or anyhow you've got a pretty good hunch, who these people are?"

"Why, yes, Italians," laughed the other.

"Now, that ain't what I mean," Matty went on. "No dodging, but own up."

"You're wrong there," Elmer said. "I don't know, and my suspicions so far are founded on such slight evidence that I don't care to commit myself before the whole of you—yet."

"But from what you said just now," Matty continued, "you don't seem to agree with the rest of us when we call these Italians anarchists."

"Because there hasn't been a solitary thing to prove it. We pathfinders must always discover some trace of the trail, or else we'd go astray. And I've owned up that I'm more than half inclined to believe these people are not the bad lot you'd make out."

"But they've got our chum a prisoner," said Red.

"Looks that way," assented Elmer, cheerfully.

"And honest men would never do a thing like that," declared Red.

"Oh, wouldn't they?" replied the other. "Perhaps now the shoe might be on the other foot."

"Eh?"

"And perhaps these honest people might suspect that you three fellows in uniform represented the great United

States army about to surround them, and make them prisoners because they had been occupying private property here at Munsey's mill."

The scouts looked at one another, astonished. Here was a theory then which had never appealed to them before.

"Well, I declare!" gasped Red.

"Don't it just beat the Dutch how he gets on to all these things?" said Lil Artha.

"But, Elmer, why take poor Nat a prisoner, bottle him up so he couldn't call for help, fetch him to this old shack, and finally carry him off when they light out?"

It was Matty who asked this question. Elmer smiled and shook his head.

"I can figure out a lot of things," he said, "just as I can read Indian writing; but please don't expect me to tell you what people *think*. I only know that these Italians were surely frightened at the sudden appearance of three fellows in khaki, and that they probably took them for soldiers. They must have had some idea in view when they captured Nat, and hustled him to this shack. Perhaps they only meant to hide here until the rest of us had gone."

"And they got more scared when you sounded that bugle, I reckon," remarked Lil Artha.

"Yes, and then the coming of another bunch of six scouts may have made them believe the worst was about to happen," Elmer continued.

"Say, I thought I heard low voices when I was just going to peep in that window there, and the bugle called me back to duty," Landy spoke up.

"Yes," Elmer added, "and it may be the coming of

Landy just finished their panic. After he went away they must have vamosed the ranch in a hurry."

"Well, all this is mighty interesting, sure," declared Red, with an appreciative nod, "but it ain't bringing us any closer to finding our chum Nat."

"Yes, what's the programme, Elmer?" asked Chatz. "Do we take up the trail right away, and try to follow these heah rascals to their new camp? You can count on all of us, suh, to do the troop credit."

"There may be another way," remarked Elmer, who seemed to be pondering over the matter.

"Tell us about it, then, please."

"Sometimes it's the best policy to hike after an enemy as fast as you can put. Then again, there are other times when a whole lot can be won just by waiting for the enemy *to come to you.*"

"That's so, fellows," declared Matty; "I see what Elmer means. He thinks that if we hid out here, we'd be able to bag the whole blooming crowd soon."

"Sounds all right in theory," admitted Red, "but for one I'd like to know why Elmer believes that push will come back after a little."

"I only feel pretty sure on one point," explained the acting scout master. "And that concerns the woman alone."

"Meaning, I take it, that you think they'll send her back, the cowards, to find out whether the coast is clear," ventured Red.

"No, they will never have to send her back, fellows," Elmer went on, positively.

"Won't, eh?" remarked Lil Artha.

"I firmly believe that once we withdraw from this same old shack the woman will steal back of her own free will."

"To get her precious old comb, mebbe," sneered Red.

"To recover something which I guess she values above ten thousand combs," and Elmer as he spoke held up the string of beads forming the rosary.

"In her hurry to get away she must have forgotten all about this. But I warrant you, fellows, she's discovered the loss by now. What follows? She makes up her mind that she's just *got* to return and find it, if so be we haven't taken it from that nail where it was hanging when we came in."

"Good! You've got things down just pat, Elmer. And then what?" asked Matty.

"I expect to hide near by while the rest of you go noisily away. She can't know how many came, and she'll think all have departed. Then, when she comes in I'll make her a prisoner. Perhaps they'll be glad to exchange Nat for their woman. Or else, if we can make her understand that we're only toy soldiers, and mean the men no harm, she will lead us to their hide-out."

The scouts were listening attentively, as they always did when Elmer was talking. He possessed such a fund of interesting information that they knew full well they could learn many useful things by trying to grasp the ideas he advanced.

CHAPTER X.

HOW THE TRAP WORKED.

"THERE's only one thing about it that I object to on general principles," remarked Mark.

"What's that?" asked Elmer.

"You shouldn't think to stay here alone," the other went on. "Perhaps one of the men might return with the woman—if she does come."

"Yes, that's true; there is a chance," Elmer admitted.

"Well, you see how you'd be up against it then," Mark went on, earnestly. "A savage Italian woman, who might have a knife along, would be bad enough for one fellow to handle."

"That's so, Mark."

"And should there be a dago man along, why, I guess you'd just have to sit sucking your thumb and not making a move," Mark continued.

"I reckon I would," laughed Elmer. "All of which means that you think I ought to pick out a couple of husky fellows to keep me company."

"That's what I'd do."

"And that you wouldn't mind being one of the same guards, eh, Mark?"

"I'd enjoy it all right, Elmer."

"Well, I'm thinking that way myself now. You can hold over with me, then. I'll want another fellow, too. Let's see," and he glanced at the eager faces by which he was surrounded: "oh, well, Lil Artha will be the other."

"Oh, shucks!" grumbled Red, bitterly disappointed, because he dearly loved action.

"Matty," said the acting scout master.

"On deck," replied the leader of the Beaver Patrol, saluting.

"You might try and see how far you've gone in the art of following a trail. I don't believe these rough fellows know the first thing about trying to hide their tracks, so you oughtn't to have a great deal of trouble."

"Oh, I guess I'd be equal to the job so long as they keep down on the low ground. But if they once start up the side of the hill, where it's all rocky, I reckon my cake will be dough, then, Elmer."

"Do your best, anyhow, Matty," the scout master went on; "nobody can do more. But to tell you the truth, I believe the first chance lies here."

"You really think, then, the woman will return?" queried Mark.

"I am almost dead certain of it," Elmer replied. "I've been among the Italians some in the colony they have on the outskirts of our town. And I've studied them more or less. They seem a queer people to us, but their religion is a big part of their lives—at least that goes with the women part of the settlement."

"I think you're right, Elmer," remarked George, who had not spoken up to now; "I happen to know a little about the Italians, too, because my father employs a lot of 'em, you see. Wouldn't be surprised one bit if she sneaks back here to recover those beads. They mean a heap to her, fellows."

Everybody stared to hear George talk like that, for as a rule he was hard to convince; which fact, as has been stated before, had caused him to be known as "Doubting George."

"Well, let's get busy," suggested Red, who, if he could not hold over to assist Elmer, at least felt that the sooner he and the rest started on the trail the better.

"That's the stuff," added Toby, also anxious to be doing something, he cared little what.

"All right," remarked Elmer, "and, as a first move, suppose you fellows begin to back out of here. Keep in a bunch outside. Mark, you and Lil Artha watch for a chance to drop down in the bushes, and lie as quiet as church mice till I give the signal, which will be a whistle. Understand?"

"Sure," replied Lil Artha, pausing in the doorway to watch Elmer hang up the beads again on the nail where he had found them; "but why ought we be so particular about dropping out of sight, if you don't mind telling us?"

"Well, it might be the woman has already returned, and is hiding somewhere close by, waiting for the crowd to move."

"That's so," admitted Lil Artha.

"And of course if she even suspected that any of us hung out she wouldn't try to enter the shack at all," Elmer pursued.

"Then we'll have to be mighty careful, Mark, how we do the great vanishing act," the tall scout remarked.

"Wait till the boys happen to bunch around you, then just drop, and let them go on. But Mark, as you will be the last one out, suppose you close the door after you, just as if the shack were empty."

"Are you expecting to hide behind that box, Elmer?" demanded his chum, pointing to the affair that had evidently served as a rude table.

"Just what I am," replied the other, promptly.

"Oh, I see."

And with one last look around, Mark advanced toward the exit, beyond which the scouts could be seen talking and gesturing as Matty looked for the trail left when the Italians fled in such haste.

Evidently it was Mark's idea to take a good mental impression of the interior of the shack away with him. This would prove useful in case there arose a sudden necessity for his presence, and that of Lil Artha, on the scene of action.

When the last of his companions had gone, and the rough door of the shack was swung shut, Elmer hastened to softly move the big box a little, so that it might suit his purpose better.

He did not imagine that this would appear suspicious in the eyes of the woman, should she return for her rosary, because it was to be expected that in a search of the cabin such changes were apt to take place.

He could still hear the chatter of many voices outside, but they were growing fainter. Evidently Matty must have found the trail he wanted, showing where the four Italians, together with their prisoner, had left the concealed shack.

So, knowing the value of time in an affair like this, Elmer hastened to crawl behind the big box.

Anyone entering the room could not see him, nor would his crouching form be visible from the hole in the shack wall, intended as a window.

At the same time Elmer had so contrived things that, by making use of an old bunch of straw which he allowed to hang over the edge of the table, he was easily able to keep watch upon both openings, the window and the door.

Then he waited patiently for something to happen.

Some minutes passed.

Outside all seemed as quiet as a Sunday in Hickory Ridge.

The sound of boyish voices had utterly died away, proving that Matty must be showing considerable skill in leading his detachment along a trail.

Indeed, once the presence of human beings no longer acted as a disturbing element, a little frisky red squirrel hopped up in the open window and peeped within the shack.

Perhaps the little chap was more or less at home there. At any rate Elmer was pleased to see him sit up on his haunches and begin to gnaw at a stray nut he had evidently discovered.

To his mind the red squirrel was apt to serve in place of a vidette. Should anyone approach the shack now the little nut-cracker would give warning by frisking away in sudden alarm.

So the wide-awake scout finds opportunities to make use of the most ordinary and commonplace things to be met with in the woods.

Everything may have a meaning, if only the scout possesses the key of knowledge so necessary for the unlocking of the door.

Not moving a finger Elmer simply awaited the turn of events.

And not once did he doubt the outcome, so positive was he that his reasoning must be correct.

If the woman returned alone, he believed they ought to easily take her prisoner; but, on the other hand, should one or more of the men accompany her, he must expect the conditions to be changed, and alter his own plans in consequence.

Two minutes must have gone by now.

Elmer was not simply guessing this, or, as Lil Artha would say, "making a blind stab at it." He knew because, as he crouched there watching, he was continually marking the flight of time by counting to himself.

In imagination his gaze followed the swinging pendulum of the big grandfather clock that stood in the hall of his home.

"Tick, tick, tick!" he could see it go back and forth, each movement marking the passing of another second of precious time.

Ah! the squirrel had ceased to work at his nut now. He even gave signs of sudden alarm, as though his keen little ratlike ears had caught a foreign sound indicating the coming of a human being.

And yet Elmer knew positively that he himself had not moved in the slightest degree, so that the squirrel's panic could not be laid at his door.

"I guess something's going to happen," he thought, "unless either Mark or Lil Artha showed themselves recklessly; and I don't believe they'd do it."

He continued to watch his four-footed little sentinel perched up there in the apology for a window.

Even as he looked the timid squirrel vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

Elmer only silently chuckled, quite satisfied with the way things were working.

And he somehow still continued to keep his eyes glued on that hole in the wall, as though laboring under the impression that when the Italian woman did come she would first of all appear in that particular quarter.

And he was right.

Even as he looked he discovered a suspicious movement in the gap. This was brought about by the uplifting of a human hand, upon the fingers of which he could count at least five broad rings without settings.

Perhaps the owner of that hand was on her knees, and in this manner sought to rise up.

Elmer, still looking, saw a head presently fill part of the crude window.

It was a woman who stared in, there could be no questioning that fact. And so far as he could tell she seemed to be alone, for he neither saw nor heard any sign of a second party.

Once he knew her burning gaze was fastened upon the bunch of straw which he had arranged so as to serve as a veil, back of which he might continue to watch what was taking place.

Elmer fairly held his breath, fearing that she might have discovered the lurker, or at least entertained suspicions regarding his presence there.

But not so.

Her eyes, having swept back and forth until they had

fairly covered the whole interior of the dimly lighted shack, seemed to be attracted toward one particular spot.

This was where the string of beads hung from the nail driven into a log.

It was the lodestone which had served to draw this woman once more into the danger zone.

And from that instant, if Elmer had allowed the slightest doubt to creep into his mind before, it no longer found lodgment there.

The woman was bound to enter in order to obtain possession of that precious string of beads.

Once she thrust her head and shoulders through the opening and attempted to clutch the rosary, but the effort was useless.

"Now she is coming!"

Elmer whispered this to himself as he saw that the woman no longer occupied the opening—she had undoubtedly started for the door.

Yes, now he could see the closed door begin to quiver, as though eager hands had started to open it.

Elmer held his breath with eagerness, and all the while watched the door.

Between his strong teeth the scout master held a little German silver whistle, such as patrol leaders usually carry for signaling purposes.

This he expected to sound when the time was ripe, and he had every reason to believe that his two comrades would rush into the shack the very instant they heard the call.

Now the door was surely opening wider. Even in her hurry the Italian woman did not forget the need of due

caution when all these enemies seemed to be hanging around.

Her experiences across the ocean may have made her exceedingly ill disposed to trust anything that wore a uniform.

Yes, the door had given way by now to admit a moving figure, and then it was drawn shut again.

Elmer smiled to see how closely his guess had come to the actual truth. The Italian woman was not only squatty, and "broad of beam," as Lil Artha would have put it, but, as Elmer had said, might be close on sixty years of age, for she had many wrinkles, and her hair was certainly gray.

She left the door unfastened behind her. Elmer chuckled to himself under his breath, for he saw that in doing this the woman had not only left a way of speedy escape open for herself in case of necessity, but also a free passage for the scouts when the signal whistle blew.

CHAPTER XI.

RUN DOWN.

STRAIGHT across the floor of the shack glided the woman. She was making a bee line for the string of beads with the little silver cross at the double end.

And the hidden scout could hear the low words of musical Italian flowing from her lips when she reached out an eager hand to seize upon the sacred article.

Now was his time.

The critical moment had arrived when he must proceed to spring his trap.

As silently as he could, then, Elmer arose to his feet. He was behind the woman and could never bring himself to believe that he had made even the slightest sound when rising.

Then the only explanation left was that the woman happened to be in front of the broken looking glass at the moment, bent on fastening the beads about her thick neck. And if so, she must have discovered him as he arose from behind the big box.

At any rate she uttered a cry that to his mind was not unlike the snarl of a wild beast. He saw the almost savage look that came over her swarthy face, and knew that after all, such a woman was fully as much to be feared as the stoutest ladrone.

And so Elmer did not think it was unworthy of a true scout to send out the call for help.

The woman might be disposed to defy just one half-grown lad, whereas if she believed herself to be up against the whole troop she would submit with the best grace she could command.

And so he blew a shrill blast that must bring both Mark and Lil Artha dashing to the spot.

The effect upon the woman was rather surprising.

Perhaps Elmer might have expected seeing her cower down, seized with a sudden overwhelming fear, but nothing of the kind occurred.

To his surprise she snatched out a wicked-looking knife

from the bosom of her dress. It looked to Elmer like a broken kitchen knife that had been ground down to a point. With such a blade he remembered seeing the Italian women from the settlement just outside Hickory Ridge wandering around in the early spring, digging dandelion plants for "greens."

He could hear the rush of approaching footsteps even as the woman sprang for the door with a wild look on her face.

The other two scouts had of course caught his shrill signal, and were hastening to join their leader.

Undoubtedly both Mark and Lil Artha must have seen the woman, if not while she was looking in at the window, then when she turned the corner of the hidden shack to enter by the door.

And hence they would surely understand that there was no man opposed to their combined force.

The fact of the woman being armed with so terrible a weapon as a knife, and that look of grim determination on her dark face, alarmed Elmer.

What if she attacked the two scouts—what if in her sudden panic she wounded either of his chums? There could be no telling what a fear-crazed, ignorant woman, strong as an ox, and almost as irresponsible, might do in an emergency like this.

Of course he would have only been too well pleased could he have shown the woman that it was all a mistake, and that they meant her no ill.

But with her brandishing that wicked-looking knife and leaping for the door, there was certainly no opportunity for argument.

Elmer sprang forward.

His main idea was to try and knock that blade from her grasp by striking sharply on her arm or her knuckles.

At the same time he thought to warn the other scouts, so that they might take due precautions when suddenly brought face to face with the Italian woman who was running amuck.

Perhaps when they heard him shout they would just naturally believe he was being hard pressed. And in that case, instead of deterring them, his cries would only further spur the others on.

Nevertheless Elmer lifted his voice in warning:

"Look out, boys! She's got a knife, and is coming out at you! Take care there!"

Just then something happened.

The woman had not turned her head as Elmer thus gave tongue, as might a hound on the warm trail of the fox.

She kept straight on. The door was before her, and while she had drawn it shut after entering, it has been mentioned before that she made no attempt to fasten the same.

So now, when she hurled her whole weight against the barrier it flew outward with a jump.

As luck would have it, the two scouts had managed to reach the door at exactly the same time. And that second chanced to be the identical one when the frightened foreigner crashed into the door.

There could only be one result, and that filled with bitterness and woe to both Lil Artha and Mark. As the uncouth door was thrown suddenly outward, as if forced

by a battering ram from within, it struck the scouts a tremendous blow.

They crumpled up and went over. A couple of tenpins struck by a swiftly hurled ball could hardly have collapsed more ingloriously than did Lil Artha and his mate.

Indeed, the long-legged scout seemed to perform a complete revolution in the air, landing on his knees among the bushes.

Two seconds later, when Elmer dashed out of the shack, this was the astonishing spectacle he saw—the woman running away as best her bulk allowed, casting glances that were half frightened, half triumphant, behind her; while Mark was sitting up, rubbing a bump on his forehead ruefully, and Lil Artha had taken out a handkerchief to dab at his bleeding nose.

Still, nothing short of an earthquake could ever bottle up the flow of animal spirits that usually possessed the lanky one.

While he applied his handkerchief until it looked particularly gory, he was bent upon giving expression to his views.

"Wow! and again I say, wow! What cyclone was that we ran up against, Elmer? Did you let fly with that club of yours, or did the old shack just take a notion to fall over on us? It felt like I was being kicked by an army mule."

"Same here, Elmer," lamented Mark, as he succeeded in struggling to his feet.

"Well, it wasn't anything like that at all," declared Elmer, hastily; "and if you take the trouble to look

yonder, before your eyes begin to close up, you'll see what hit you, running away like a scared hippopotamus."

"Glory be! Was it that dago woman?" yelled Lil Artha, now on his feet again.

"Yes, she burst the door open when she saw me, and as you chanced to be in the way, why, you got the benefit, that's all," Elmer remarked.

"Don't let her get away, fellows! Come on, who's afraid? We can cover three feet to her one. Let's make her a prisoner," shouted Lil Artha, whose usually even temper seemed to have been decidedly ruffled by his recent mishap.

So the three scouts left the shack and began to rush after the fleeing Italian woman.

Of course she knew immediately that she was being pursued. She tried to increase her pace, but evidently with little success. Short, dumpy people can never hope to compete with slim, long-legged greyhounds like Lil Artha.

And so, almost from the start, the three scouts began to close in upon the fleeing Italian woman.

"Say, she's got a bloody old knife," gasped Lil Artha, as they struggled on through the woods where the creeping vines and the underbrush, not to mention frequent logs and occasional woodchuck holes, made running a desperate business.

"That's so, Elmer," piped up Mark, "I saw her shake it at us then."

"I know it, fellows," said the scout master, "and that's what I was shouting about, to warn you."

"Are we gaining any, Elmer? I can't see just as well

as I'd like, with this thing up to my nose," the lanky runner asked.

"Pulling up on her fast, my boy," came the reassuring answer.

"And what're we goin' to do when she turns on us?" demanded Lil Artha.

"First of all, surround her."

"That sounds good as far as she goes. What next?"

"We must try and knock that nasty thing out of her hand by a sharp blow on the arm," continued Elmer, who strangely enough seemed as cool as a cucumber, while both of his companions showed the effect of the mad pace.

"I tumble to it, Elmer," gasped Lil Artha, "and I'm the fellow to give that lovely little tap. I made Red drop his stick seven times when we were having a bout with long sticks, and which we pretended were the old-style quarterstaves."

Even the long-legged Lil Artha must see now that the distance separating the pursuers from the fugitive had been greatly shortened. Another five minutes would see them overhaul the woman, unless something not down on the bills came to pass.

Five minutes—why there would surely be ample time to bring this result about, judging by the way they were covering two yards to her one.

The woman knew it, too.

She was becoming more and more anxious. This was shown by the way she kept turning her head from time to time as she ran.

Elmer knew what was apt to happen. For himself he

found that he had need of both his eyes with every step forward he took through that tangle, where trailing vines lay in wait to trip him up, and branches hung low as if seeking to catch in his hair, to make him another Absalom.

Already had Lil Artha gone down with a thud, but as he said himself, his " dander " was aroused, and no little things like this could be allowed to interfere with his pursuit.

So he had hastily scrambled to his feet and followed at the heels of his more fortunate chums, a sight calculated to excite wild laughter among the rest of the troop, with his blood-flecked face.

At any rate Lil Artha was game to the backbone, and Elmer often remembered it afterward when " trying out " his scouts.

The closer they drew to the fleeing woman the greater her fright seemed to become.

Whenever he saw her looking backward over her shoulder Elmer would make pantomime gestures with his free hand.

He was trying the best he knew how to tell her to give over this foolish flight, and that they had no hostile intentions.

But the chances were she interpreted these movements just the other way, and believed he must be threatening her with all sorts of terrible things unless she yielded herself a prisoner to their prowess.

Well, no matter, it could hardly last more than another minute or so. Do what she would the woman must find it utterly impossible to get away.

Already the active mind of the young scout master was

busy, weaving a clever scheme by means of which they could surround the woman, and by attacking her all at once, succeed in knocking the shining knife out of her hand.

No doubt he would have succeeded in doing the job, too, had conditions continued to make such a move necessary.

But they did not.

The fickle hand of Fate came in between just in time to share in the matter.

It seemed to Elmer that they were constantly getting into a more tangled mess of undergrowth. All around and ahead were traps calculated to slyly catch unwary feet and trip them up.

Suddenly Elmer gave vent to a low gasping cry; but while Mark involuntarily turned his head to learn if his companion had gone lame, to his surprise and gratification he found the other running as smoothly and easily as ever, as though perfectly fresh.

"The woman!" shrieked Lil Artha, who, apparently, from his position in the rear had been enabled to see just what had happened.

"Where—is—she?" gasped Mark, once more allowing his eyes to travel ahead.

For, apparently, the fleeing Italian had vanished at that instant, as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed her up.

"She's down—caught her foot in a root!" cried Elmer, not slackening his warm pace, for he wanted to make a quick job of the thing.

Then Mark saw that some object was threshing the bushes furiously. Twice the woman tried to rise, but on each occasion she fell back again.

Then presently he gave a shout as he guessed the true situation.

"She's caught fast in a vine, Elmer. Even the woods work with us! I tell you she's a prisoner right now! All we've got to do is to tie her hands!"

"But look out for that dandelion knife, boys," warned Elmer, as the three of them reached the spot.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LANGUAGE OF SIGNS.

It happened just as the boys had expected. While turning her head so often to see how near these persistent pursuers were, the woman had caught her foot in a stout vine.

She had been hurled to the ground with considerable force, but apparently received no serious injury. When she tried to regain her feet, however, on each occasion the clinging vine refused to release its hold. As a consequence she went down again.

Finally, as though realizing the uselessness of further struggling against Fate, the woman stopped trying to get up.

Having twisted around in some manner, she just sat there and stared at the three boys in khaki.

"Now she's wondering what we're going to do," said Mark, as they stood with the woman between them.

"Yes, she's frightened again, poor thing," remarked Elmer. "I'm afraid it's these uniforms that have done it. She surely takes us for soldiers, and thinks we've come here just to arrest the whole bunch."

"I'm glad of one thing, though," said Lil Artha.

"What might that be?" asked Elmer.

"Looks like she must have dropped that fierce frog sticker when she fell, because you notice she hasn't got the old knife in her claws just now."

"That's right," admitted Mark, cheerfully, for the fact naturally pleased him.

"And here it is, right at my feet," said Elmer, as he stooped and took something from the ground.

It was the knife which the Italian woman had flourished so recklessly.

"My stars, what a savage-looking thing!" ejaculated Lil Artha, as he stared at the knife.

"Well, it does look wicked for a fact," remarked Elmer; "but after all, I reckon she's never done anything with it but cut dandelion greens, or else prepared fish," and he took occasion to bring the blade close to his nose while speaking, only to make a face, as though the fishy odor that clung to the steel might be far from pleasant.

"Well, we've overhauled the lady; now whatever are we going to do with her?" demanded the tall scout.

"I wonder if she understands English?" remarked Elmer.

"Try her and see," Mark suggested.

The woman had been watching them keenly all this while. Her manner suggested that she might be trying to read her

fate more from their actions than any words which they would let fall.

Accordingly, Elmer stepped forward a pace.

"No hurt," he said, in the gentlest tone he could muster; "friends—boys—no soldiers."

"She don't savvy worth a cent, Elmer," said Lil Artha, in disgust.

"And her eyes keep following your movements with the knife, as if she thought you meant to strike her," observed Mark.

Elmer himself saw that this was a fact. Plainly, then, the woman could not understand English, and in her present state of fright she seemed incapable of reading his reassuring gestures. What he meant to be a sign of friendliness she interpreted as a symbol of hostility.

"Seems to me we ought first of all to get her foot free from that nasty tangle," he remarked.

"Sure, and I guess the only way to do it is to cut the plagued old vine," said Lil Artha. "But I guess I hadn't ought to run the thing down, because it served us a mighty good turn just now."

"Step in and cut the vine, Elmer," suggested Mark.

When, however, the young scout master had taken a step or two forward, knife in hand, the woman's fears were once more aroused.

She threw herself forward, struggling violently to release her trapped foot. But the vine proved as strong as a new clothesline, and held tenaciously.

"Good gracious, what a silly goose!" exclaimed Lil Artha, "when all we want to do is to set her free."

"But you see she don't look at it that way. The poor creature thinks we're conspiring to turn the tables on her, just because she threatened us with this knife. Here, hold it, Mark."

Elmer handed over the knife to his chum at a moment when he saw that the woman's eyes were fastened upon him.

Then he held up both his hands as he smiled reassuringly. It was the universal "peace sign" known throughout the world. Hardly a savage tribe in the heart of Darkest Africa but would recognize the meaning it expressed.

This time when he advanced the Italian woman did not struggle again. She watched him. Curiosity was overcoming fear. Perhaps she had even begun to realize that these dreadful soldiers did not present such a savage front after all.

So Elmer dropped down on his knees, at a point where he could come in contact with her imprisoned foot, and the wiry vine that gripped it.

A brief examination convinced him that since she had turned around several times during her violent struggle to break away, the only means of freeing the entrapped foot was to cut the vine.

Of course that meant the knife again, and if he asked Mark to hand it to him, possibly the foolish foreigner would have another fit of terror.

So Elmer commenced to use tact again.

First of all he commenced to work at the vine, the woman watching him eagerly.

"No use, pardner," remarked Lil Artha. "That thing is like steel bands, and the old woman has managed to tie

herself up handsomely. Nothing but a knife, and a sharp one, too, will do the business."

"I know it," replied Elmer, quietly. "I'm only pretending to try and get her foot out just to make her understand that we want to help her. Now just watch me, and see how I manage."

Presently, as if despairing of success, he ceased his labor. Then he pointed to the vine, and made several slashes across it with his forefinger, after which he pointed to the knife Mark was holding out, and nodded his head.

The woman was interested.

"Go through it all again; she's beginning to understand," said Mark, himself deeply interested in the success of this deaf and dumb method of communication.

"Well, of all the stupids going, give me one of these same dagoes," grumbled Lil Artha. "Why, you make it plain enough for a Hottentot to grab, Elmer. But I'm beginning to hope she'll get on soon. Try her once more, pardner. You're the boss hand at wig-wagging. Give her the high sign, Elmer."

Deliberately Elmer again pretended to cut the vine with his forefinger, then shook his head and afterward pointed to the knife.

The woman's black eyes followed each movement, and evidently she began to grasp the idea that he did not desire the weapon so as to injure, but to assist her.

"Glory be!" ejaculated Lil Artha, who had been almost holding his breath with suspense while all this pantomime business was going on, "look at that, would you, fellows? A bright thought has managed to get a foothold in her

brain. I bet you it needed a sledge hammer to pound it in. Say, she's beginning to smile at you, Elmer. You've won out. She believes you mean all right. Give him the toad-sticker, Mark, and let him get to work."

Elmer knew that his actions would no longer be misconstrued. The Italian woman understood.

So he held out his hand and received the knife from Mark. The woman moved uneasily, but the smile Elmer gave her was surely enough to disarm any lingering suspicion she may have entertained.

Of course it was only a small job now to cut through the obstinate vine at a point where the greatest holding point lay.

"There you are!" remarked Lil Artha, as the knife severed the last strand.

The woman got slowly to her feet. She folded her arms across her bosom with what seemed to be an air of resignation. Yet Elmer knew that all the while those sparkling black eyes were watching him intently.

The woman had guessed that Elmer must be the leader of the three strangers in uniform. Hence she looked to him for orders.

"Well, what're we going to do with this pretty thing, now that we've got it?" remarked Lil Artha.

"I suppose, first of all, we ought to go back to the shack," said Elmer.

"You mean to hold her a prisoner, I take it?" asked Mark, who had the utmost faith in the acting scout master's ability to grasp the situation.

"That's about the only thing open to us," Elmer re-

plied. "Through the woman perhaps we can get in touch with the three men who are holding Nat Scott a prisoner, and bring about his release."

"I don't see how," grumbled Lil Artha. "If you had all that trouble getting her to understand you only meant to cut the old vine, and not her foot off, how in the dickens d'ye expect to get her to know we don't mean to do her bunch any harm?"

"Oh, there may be ways," smiled Elmer.

"But you don't speak Italiano, Elmer; that's dead sure, else you'd have used it right now to tell her you only wanted to cut the vine," Lil Artha went on.

"How about George?" remarked Elmer.

"What! George Robbins?" asked the tall scout.

"Why, yes, you remember he told us his father employs a large number of these foreigners, and unless I'm mistaken I think I remember hearing George say he'd been picking up quite a lot of Italian words."

"That sounds all to the good then," declared Lil Artha, with enthusiasm. "Bully for George! His knowledge may be the key that's going to unlock this old padlock for us."

"Then let's get back to the shack. Fall in around the woman. That ought to tell her what we want her to do."

Elmer, as he spoke, took up his position alongside the prisoner, while Mark and the long-legged scout clapped their sticks to their right shoulders as though parading arms.

Then Elmer pointed backward in the direction they had just come from.

"Go!" he said, impressively.

Whether the prisoner understood the word, or judged from their actions what was required, Elmer could not say. All he cared for was the fact that when he started off she accompanied him, limping a little as though she might have twisted her ankle somewhat in the violence of her struggles, looking sullen rather than fearful now, and apparently resigned to her fate, whatever that might prove to be.

There was no difficulty about reaching the abandoned shack again. All Elmer had to do was to follow the broad trail they had made when chasing after the fleeing woman.

They found no change when they presently drew up at the hidden retreat. Nor was there any sign of the other scouts, though once Elmer thought he did hear loud and excited voices up on the side of the mountain, as though Matty and his detachment might have found it necessary to leave the lowlands, and were having troubles of their own.

"Well," remarked Lil Artha, as they arrived in front of the shack, "here we are, all to the good, and right side up with care. The question is, what d'ye expect to do with the signorina, now that you've got her?"

"She must be kept a prisoner in the shanty until we can decide on our course, and get George here," replied Elmer, so readily that the others understood how he must have his plan of action fully mapped out in his own mind.

"Let's see you usher her in, then," chuckled the tall scout, just as though he anticipated enjoying a treat when Elmer tried to "shoo" the Italian woman into the place.

But it proved the easiest thing possible. When Elmer took her by the arm and pointed to the open door the woman gave him one look, shook herself free from his grasp, and hastened to vanish within the shack.

"Easy as falling off a log," declared Lil Artha, a shade of disappointment in his voice, for he had anticipated more or less of a struggle.

Elmer quietly closed the door.

"How are you going to fasten it?" asked Mark.

"I wish that was the hardest nut I had to crack," laughed the scout master. "Fortunately the door opens outwardly."

"Unfortunately, you mean," echoed Mark, as he touched the painful lump on his forehead.

"I say yes to that," grinned Lil Artha, whose nose had stopped bleeding by this time, but whose face was a sight to behold, being smeared with all manner of strange red marks that made him resemble an Apache Indian on the warpath.

"As it does open outwardly, however," Elmer went on saying, with a sympathetic smile for the woes of his chums, "it ought to be easy enough for us to barricade the door. Look around, boys, and see if you can find several good stout sticks about three or four feet long. Even a small tree trunk would be about what we want."

"And I think I know where to find one," said Lil Artha, hastening away, "because I took a header over it when we were chasing the dago woman."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CALL OF THE WOLF.

"THAT's the ticket, Lil Artha," said Elmer, as the tall scout returned presently, bearing on his shoulder quite a good-sized log about five feet in length.

"Reckon that ought to hold all right," panted the burden bearer, as he cast the small tree trunk at Elmer's feet.

"Fine and dandy," commented Mark, beginning to get the barricade in position.

Of course the log had to be planted in such a way that it might secure a grip on the door. This meant that it must incline at an angle of more than forty-five degrees.

Elmer dug a little hole, first of all, at a certain distance from the door, after the length of the log had been tested.

Then, with the help of his chums, he seated one end of the log firmly in this. When the other end was allowed to slip down the face of the door it rested about halfway.

"No danger of that slipping loose if she tries to push out," remarked Elmer.

Mark gave several additional pulls downward at the upper end of the log, to make it still firmer.

"I'll just wager," he said, finally, "that nobody, man or woman, could open that door now from the inside."

"How about the window?" asked Lil Artha.

"You might manage to crawl through that small opening, but that broad-beamed woman, never," declared the scout master, positively.

"Then we've got our wild bird safely caged."

"Looks like it, for the time being, anyhow," was the way Elmer replied.

"Say, see here, you don't seem to go very strong on the jail business. What's on your mind now, Elmer?" and Lil Artha confronted the other as he spoke, lifting a reproachful finger at him.

"Well, there's many a slip between the cup and the lip, you know."

"Oh, rats! Get down to business, Elmer. What might happen to upset our plans?" asked the tall scout.

"One of the men might return."

"And of course throw down the log and liberate our prisoner. But between you and me and the lamp-post, Elmer, I don't believe that's going to happen. 'Cause why? Well, it's my honest belief that this Italiano woman's got all the nerve there is in that crowd. The men are cowards."

"I'm rather of the same opinion, Artha," remarked Elmer. "And I've thought that same thing more than once when watching some of them in their settlement."

"But how about your other reason, Elmer?" asked Lil Artha. "Suppose now the men don't come, what danger is there of her getting out? D'ye expect she could burrow under the walls like we did once up at that old lumber camp?"

"Perhaps. But I was thinking of another thing. Notice how poorly this shack is put together? Why, if that Amazon got on the rampage and just took a notion, I believe she could bring the whole business down in ruins about her head."

"Wow, I guess she could, Elmer!" remarked the tall

boy, nodding his head, "just like Samson did long ago when he yanked the temple down, and kicked the bucket himself, with all his enemies. But I don't think this dull-witted creature's got sense enough for that; do you?"

"Perhaps not. I hope she won't, anyhow, because I mean to leave you and Mark here to guard our prisoner while I'm gone," said Elmer.

"Oh, I see, you want to join the rest of the troop. Perhaps you've got a hunch they might be needing you about now?" Lil Artha observed.

"One thing I know, and that is they've left the low ground and gone up the side of the mountain."

"I guessed that myself when I heard some of the fellers callin' up yonder. So it stands to reason they've lost the trail among the rocks," Lil Artha went on.

"I expect as much," Elmer said, "and you know that since the men carried Nat Scott away with them we've just got to find them sooner or later."

"But why d'ye suppose now they'd be so pesky mean as to climb the hill?" demanded the tall scout.

"Oh, perhaps they guessed it would be harder for anyone to track them up there," Elmer answered.

"Yes, that's so," Mark put in; "or it might be they know of some fine cave up yonder where they can hide. You often run across caves, big and little, on stony hills."

Elmer seemed to agree with this suggestion, for he nodded his head after Mark had advanced it.

"Do you think you can manage?" he asked.

"Well, we'd be a pretty pair of scouts, wouldn't we now, if we failed to make good on a job like this?" scoffed Lil Artha.

He threw his staff over his shoulder, gun fashion, and began tramping up and down before the door of the hidden shack, just as though he were a military sentry on duty.

"I guess you'll do all right, Lil Artha," laughed Elmer.

"Before you go, Elmer," said Mark, "please tell us just why you believe these Italians haven't meant to hurt our chum Nat."

"Well, I just seem to feel it in my bones, and that's about all I can say," returned the other. "I'm more convinced now than ever that it's going to turn out only a silly mistake on their part. Perhaps they've been doing something here that's against the law, and the sight of our uniforms threw them into a panic. They've carried Nat off with them just so he couldn't give the alarm, and bring the rest down on 'em."

"Counterfeiting, perhaps," suggested Mark. "Seems to me I've heard that the Italians are pretty smart at that sort of thing."

"Well, I don't imagine it's anything as serious as that," Elmer replied.

"Then tell us what you *do* think," demanded Lil Artha.

"You *will* force my hand, will you?" laughed Elmer.

"It's only fair to tell us," pleaded the tall scout.

"Well, all right, seeing that I'm more than ever convinced I'm on the right track. Here, smell that, both of you and tell me what it reminds you of."

He thrust the queer, sharp-pointed knife that had been taken from the woman into the hand of Lil Artha.

That individual immediately raised it to his nose, took one good smell, and made a wry face.

"Ugh! rank fishy odor, all right!" he declared.

"Then look back a bit, Lil Artha," Elmer continued. "Don't you remember that in the mill and cottage we discovered a strong fishy smell when we tried to investigate that underground place?"

"You're right, we did," assented the tall scout; "it made me feel a bit squeamish, too, for if there's one thing I can't stomach it's rank fish. Ugh!"

"I see what you're leading up to, Elmer," announced Mark, briskly, "and I must say it looks as if there might be a whole lot of truth in it, too."

"These Italians are often fishermen. A cousin of mine once told me that along the Gulf coast and around New Orleans the whole fishing industry lies in their hands," Elmer went on.

"Then you believe this bunch is getting fish out of Munsey mill pond, and selling them, perhaps over in Scarsdale?" said Mark.

"They are netting fish illegally, I imagine," Elmer answered. "That would explain their alarm. Perhaps the game warden has been around and threatened to have them hauled in if they didn't take warning. And ever since that time they've been on the nervous lookout."

"Gee, I bet you now that's what it means, fellows!" declared Lil Artha, filled with new enthusiasm, as he grasped the startling idea advanced by the scout master.

"And I never saw so many big frogs as there are around here," Elmer went on.

"That's because even the boys keep away from the haunted mill," Mark added.

"You know how frogs sell in the market, and how it would pay anybody to catch a few hundred such jumboes as there are here," Elmer remarked.

"Well, it does take you to figure things out just, I must say," laughed Mark.

"He's a wizard, that's what," declared Lil Artha, whose admiration for his leader was boundless.

"Not at all," smiled the other; "a little common sense was all that was needed. The strong odor of fish in that cellar put me on the track first. You know there's an old saying to the effect that where there's smoke there must be fire."

"And then this knife, too—like as not the woman does all the cleaning of the fish. I thought she reminded me of black bass or pickerel, I wasn't sure which," Lil Artha stated, with a chuckle.

"But we've been around more or less, Elmer," Mark put in, "and I don't remember seeing any signs of fish cleaning, scales or anything."

"Of course not," came the quick reply. "If these people knew they were breaking the law, and expected the game warden to pop in on them any day, you can just believe they'd be mighty careful to hide all traces of this thing."

"Perhaps they throw it all back in the pond for fish bait," suggested the tall scout.

"Not a bad idea," commented Elmer.

"And the cellar under the mill cottage?" asked Mark.

"They might use that as a cool place to keep the fish until they can get them to market," Elmer replied.

"That's a fact, seeing they have no ice to pack them

in," Lil Artha observed. "And the more I think of it all, the better it looks to me, fellows."

"Then you believe my explanation may be the true answer to our chum's vanishing?"

"I sure do."

"That they came upon him by accident," Elmer went on, "and filled with a sudden panic, just captured him to keep Nat from calling out and bringing the rest of us around?"

"That's what they did," Lil Artha affirmed. "And no matter how sorry they might be afterward because they did it, they just can't drop him now."

"Then, since we've agreed on that point I don't see the need of my hanging around here any longer," Elmer observed, drawing his belt one notch tighter, as though preparing for new labors.

"And your orders are just the same?" Mark asked.

"Yes, you two keep guard over the shack, and don't let the prisoner get away, if you can prevent it."

"Depend on us, Elmer. And say," Lil Artha remarked, "don't you think now it would be a good thing to send George down here?"

"That's an idea worth while," Elmer quickly replied.

"Oh, I get 'em once in a long time," grinned the other.

"A good scheme, and I'll send George back as soon as I can. When he comes, take him in to see the woman. Have him try and get her to understand that we mean her men no harm, and only want them to set our chum free."

"And then what? Supposing George is able to get that pounded into her head?" asked Lil Artha

"Why, he must make her understand that we want to conduct an exchange of prisoners."

"By that, Elmer," Mark broke in, "I suppose you mean we'll give the woman up if they let Nat go free?"

"That's it," returned the leader. "And as she is the only one who knows their new hiding place, she must lead us to them."

"That puts me wise, all right," declared Lil Artha. "But get good old George here as soon as you can, Elmer. I'm just crazy to see if he knows how to tell the old woman all this."

"That's all, boys; I'll be going now."

But although Elmer said this he continued to stand there immovable. Neither of his comrades thought it strange, for they, too, had caught the same sound that had reached his ears.

It was evidently a pretty good imitation of the howl of a wolf.

Now, as this was the signal call of Elmer's own patrol they knew immediately that some scout belonging to that section of the Hickory Ridge troop must be approaching, and took this customary method of announcing his coming.

All eyes were accordingly turned toward that quarter from whence the note of the wolf had seemed to come.

This was a little up the side of the mountain. Elmer, thinking to give the other his location, sent out an answering signal.

"You're scaring the old woman again with your howls," remarked Lil Artha, pointing to the shack, at the small

window of which they could see the face of the prisoner, filled with wonder and awe.

Perhaps the Italian woman was beginning to suspect she had fallen into the hands of a pack of crazy people

"There he comes!" suddenly announced Mark, pointing as he spoke.

"Looks like Dr. Ted," remarked Lil Artha.

"Just who it is," said Elmer. "I wish it had been George Robbins, now, because that would have saved time. No such luck, it seems, so we'll just have to make the best of it."

"But what d'ye suppose Ted's coming back after?" pursued the tall scout.

"Help," declared Mark, decisively. "You heard what Elmer said when he turned the troop over to Matty? If they found themselves up a stump they were to let Elmer know, just so he could swing in somehow, and pull them out of the hole."

"They're up against it, good and hard, bet you a cooky on it," declared Lil Artha, as the other scout drew near.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NEED OF A PATHFINDER.

As Dr. Ted approached he made the scout salute in due regulation style.

"You're wanted above, thir," he said to the acting scout master.

"By that I suppose you mean they've struck a snag?" questioned Elmer.

"The rockth bothered Matty. Tho long ath they left a trail in the earth he could follow it all right. But when it kept on athending it got tougher and tougher. Then he lotht it altogether, and thent me to fetch you along, thir."

"All right, I'll go with you, Number Three. You'll be interested to know that we've got a prisoner here in the old cabin," remarked Elmer.

Ted glanced that way, and caught sight of the face in the window.

"The old Italian woman, eh?" he exclaimed.

"Sure," said Lil Artha, as proudly as though the honors of the capture belonged exclusively to him.

"Then she did come back for her beadth?"

"Yes. Tell you all about it on the way, for we must be moving now, Ted," the scout master remarked.

"All right. I'm with you, Elmer. Come on, then," and, wheeling sharply around, Ted started to retrace his steps.

So Mark and his long-legged comrade were left to guard the prison of the old Italian woman, while the other two scouts climbed the hill.

"No uthe going over the trail we made," remarked Ted. "It wound around and then climbth the hill. We could thee about where the cabin lay, and I made a bee line downhill for the thame."

As they toiled upward Elmer, keeping his promise, related all that had happened in the neighborhood of the hidden shack.

Ted seemed to enjoy the narrative very much indeed. He was particularly pleased with the account of where the old woman in her panic had burst the door open, and upset both Mark and Lil Artha.

"I wondered what happened to our friendth," said Ted. "And if you hadn't been in thuch a big hurry to cut out, I'd have tried fixing both the poor fellowth up. Lil Artha lookth like a pirate chief, and ath for Mark, you'd think hith brains might be breaking out."

Elmer had no trouble at all in following the plain trail left by Ted when he came down from above. His practiced eye could easily see the marks on turf, leaf mold, or even where the other's heels with their steel nails had scraped along a slanting rock.

"Tell me thome more about that, pleath," said Ted, while they were still climbing.

Nothing loath, for he really believed he had solved the secret of the whole business, Elmer gave him the story, from his first faint suspicion upon looking down into the strange-smelling cellar of the mill house, up to his detecting such a strong odor of fish about the Italian woman, and particularly the knife she carried.

"That'th a bully good idea, all right," said Ted, when the story was finished.

"Do you think it sounds fishy?" laughed Elmer.

"Yeth and no," answered the other, immediately. "While it theemth to be a fish yarn, yet it ith all to the good. I really believe you've gone and figured it out, Elmer. And if that ith tho, it ith going to be another big feather in your cap, don't you forget it."

"We ought to be close to where you left the rest of the boys, by now," suggested the scout master, desirous of changing the conversation, for, strange to say, Elmer never liked to hear himself praised.

"I reckon we are," replied Ted. "Suppothe you try your whistle, and give 'em a call."

So the patrol leader's whistle was brought into play again. Hardly had it sounded than there came an answer from a point not far distant.

"There they are!" cried Ted, pointing, "I thee Red waving hith hat to uth right now. We'll join 'em in a jiffy, if the walking ith good."

It proved to be decent enough for the two climbers to reach the spot where Matty and the rest of the troop awaited them.

"I'm all in, Elmer," admitted the leader of the Beaver Patrol, as he threw up both hands in disgust. "Just as I said, it was all hunk till I struck the rocks, and I've been up in the air ever since."

"Yes, Matty has even hinted that he believes those Italians must have had wings somewhere around here, and just flown away," laughed Chatz.

"Well, that wouldn't be so very queer," declared Toby Jones, always thinking of things touching on aviation. "It's a bully good place to make a start, anyway, if a feller only had the wings."

"Yes, and a gay old place to bring up on all the rocks down there. And how about our chum Nat; he never had any longing to soar through the air. But tell us what's doing, Elmer," said Red, impatiently.

"Oh, he's got lots to tell you," declared Ted, with the air of a highly favored one who had been already taken into the great secret.

Of course his words stirred the scouts as nothing else could have done. They crowded around and began to beg for particulars.

"Where's Lil Artha?" one questioned.

"And Mark?" exclaimed another.

"Say, Elmer, did she come back, and step into the nice little trap you were going to get ready?" asked a third scout, with intense interest aroused.

When Elmer nodded his head they broke out into a rousing boyish cheer.

"Tell us all about it, Elmer," was flung at the scout master from all quarters.

As this was Elmer's intention anyway he lost no time in briefly though forcibly describing all that had taken place down below.

"And now I want George to go down with Ted, here," Elmer went on, "and try to engage the woman in conversation. Tell her, if you can, who and what we are, and the reason for our coming here in uniform. Tell her we mean them no harm, but that we want our chum set free. Do you follow me, George?"

"Of course I do," came the ready answer.

"You understand Italian, and talk it some, I've been told?" Elmer went on.

"Oh, yes, I can really converse with some Italian men. Don't know about a woman, though. But I'll do my best to make her see things straight."

"I like to hear you talk that way, George," continued Elmer; "the true scout is always ready to do his best. And I think you're going to make a fine addition to our troop before long."

"After I've told her, what then?" asked George, who looked pleased at hearing these words of praise from one he respected as highly as he did Elmer.

"Why, you must bring her along, and rejoin us. Lil Artha and Mark will accompany you, because all ought to be in at the finish. You understand, don't you, George?"

"I sure do. Come on, Ted, show me the way down to the old shack. As we go along I'll be brushing up my Italian words so as to spring 'em on the old lady. This way, Ted."

"And while you're jabbering with the woman, why, perhaps now I might be amuthing mythelf doctoring the noble woundth of our two chumth," declared the fellow who was never so happy as when engaged in the work of a doctor.

Why, some of the boys often called Ted "Sawbones," because he gave himself over, heart and soul, to his one great hobby.

So the two of them vanished down the side of the hill. As their voices died away among the thickets Elmer turned his attention to the task of finding and following the trail of the Italians.

"Show me where you saw it last, Matty," he said.

"Here you are, then," came the reply; "that footprint is as plain as anything."

"So it is," remarked Elmer, after studying the mark briefly. "Our chum made that, I'm positive."

"Then he must have done it on purpose," said Matty, "because I've noticed that one footprint right along."

Elmer smiled.

"Good for Nat," he remarked. "If he don't dare use his voice and call out to us, he's doing everything in his power to show us the trail. That's what he's learned of scouting tactics. I'm glad he remembered. It shows how much a fellow can learn."

"That's right," remarked Matty; "I see it all plain enough right now; but d'ye know the suspicion never did break in on me that these tracks had been made purposely, and by Nat? Why, I just had an idea one of the bunch was a little careless, that's all."

"Well, you'll know better after this, Matty. But stand back, and let's see what luck I'll have, if so be you fellows haven't killed the trail by running around."

They watched his actions eagerly, each fellow bent on learning all he could of the science that was already proving to be so interesting.

First of all Elmer took a comprehensive survey of the ground above; for everyone understood that those they were tracking must be aiming to reach some cave or crevice farther up the slope.

Then, having settled in his mind about where the fugitives might be aiming for, the scout master began to look for marks on the rocks.

For a little while he found it very hard work, indeed, but after reaching the limits of the search maintained by Matty and those with him, the task became considerably easier.

And mindful of his position as acting scout master to the

troop during the temporary absence of Mr. Garrabrant, Elmer made it a point to explain more or less as he went along.

"See, here is where one of the men slipped on this rock, and left a new scratch. And this shows where another broke a twig off this branch in passing. You can see it has been freshly done, because the green leaves do not show much sign of wilting."

In this fashion, then, he not only intensely interested his followers, but continued to make progress all the while.

Most of the boys were eager to get points on such an engaging subject as trail finding. These hung upon his every word, examined the marks to which Elmer drew their attention, commented upon the same among themselves, and several even went so far as to take out memorandum books in which they hastily scribbled such notes as would enable them to remember.

All the while they were climbing higher, and by degrees found themselves in a wilder section than any of them had dreamed existed so near their home town of Hickory Ridge.

"Looks like there might be a few caves around such a place as this," remarked Red, as he wiped his face with the red bandana handkerchief which he had hung cowboy fashion around his neck, with the knot at the back.

"Oh, that's a dead-sure thing," replied Ty, who happened to be close at his elbow at the time. "Fact is, I've seen several myself. Anyhow, they were dark, ugly looking holes between big rocks, and if this was a game country I'd say they might be bear dens or the homes of wolves."

All this sort of talk tended to key the anticipations of

the boys up to a point where they were expecting almost anything to happen.

Elmer paid no attention to side issues. There might be a dozen likely looking hiding places along the route, but they did not interest him an iota so long as that faintly marked trail continued.

He had about all he cared to do, moving from one spot where a stone had been freshly dislodged to another point at which the moss and lichen had been torn from a sloping rock by a foot that accidentally or purposely slipped.

There were possibly some little indications, which to his mind told that they might now be drawing near the place where the panic-stricken Italians were hiding. If so, Elmer did not confide this to his companions, perhaps because he might not himself be so very sure, but more probably on account of not wishing to waste more or less precious time in explaining on what vague grounds he founded his theory.

The trees still grew around them, springing out of spaces between the rocks. They were more stunted than those in the great forest that covered the richer bottom lands, but as a rule they served as a canopy overhead, and only occasional glimpses could be obtained of the country beyond.

By this time some of the scouts had begun to feel the effect of the climb, for there is nothing more fatiguing than ascending a steep hill.

Still they proved their grit by keeping on, as if determined to stick it out.

Even fat Landy Smith, while actually panting for breath, and mopping his forehead with a damp handkerchief, stub-

bornly declined to own himself in the "has been" class, as Red called it.

They were moving along what seemed to be a little plateau, at the end of which arose a cliff seamed with numerous cracks and scars.

Elmer had smiled when he cast a glance toward the rocky wall, just as if he could scent the end of the trail close at hand.

But he was already halfway across the level territory, with the scouts scattered back of him, when without the least warning there suddenly sounded a shot that seemed to come from somewhere ahead; and the report gave each scout a strange chill in the region of his heart.

CHAPTER XV.

RESCUED—CONCLUSION.

"SCATTER, and hide!"

It was Elmer who shouted this order. He had not heard any sound as of a bullet passing, and did not know but that the shot had been fired simply for the purpose of a warning.

Still, there was no need of their taking chances. And as he gave the command, Elmer was one of the first to seek the shelter of a near-by rock.

Immediately the valiant scouts scurried around, each eagerly desirous of finding some sort of snug retreat.

No further shots came, much to the satisfaction of the

boys, and inside of half a minute not a figure was to be seen upon the little plateau.

It chanced that Red had selected the same rock as Elmer picked out, behind which to crouch.

And of course Red could not long remain silent, since his overcharged feelings just had to find a vent.

"Whew, this is what I call warm!" he said, puffing.

"Do you mean the weather, or the fact that we have been under fire?" asked Elmer, who was looking out from his end of the rock, and trying to size the situation up.

"Oh, well, I guess both of 'em would pass muster, all right," Red went on. "You don't think any fellow got hurt, do you, Elmer?"

"Not any. Fact is," continued the scout master, "I've a pretty good hunch the shot was not fired at us, but into the air, warning us to keep off or we might get hurt."

"The ginnies fired it, of course, Elmer?"

"I'm sure of that."

"And we've cornered the bunch at last, hey? You did the trick, Elmer. Trust you for following even half a trail blindfolded. But say, do you know where they're holding the fort?"

"I've got something of an idea," replied Elmer. "If you look up the face of the cliff, Red, you'll notice a bunch of green stuff growing. I think there must be a shelf of rock there, and perhaps a cave back of it."

"But what makes you think that, Elmer?"

"Because I saw the powder smoke puff out from those little bushes when the report sounded," replied Elmer.

"But my stars! that's all of fifty feet up. How d'ye

suppose those dagoes could get up there?" continued the one who sought information.

"Oh, that would just as likely as not turn out to be easy enough, once you got started. Perhaps there's some sort of path leading up the face of the cliff, and which we just can't see from here."

"What're we going to do, Elmer?"

"Nothing—just now, anyway."

"Just sit on our haunches, and wait for our birds to drop into our hands, eh?" pursued Red.

"Oh, perhaps we may have to fight for it in the end, but I'm hoping for an easier wind up to the affair," Elmer continued, musingly.

"You think the old woman may help out?"

"I know she will, if George can only succeed in convincing her that we're friends, not enemies."

"Then we're waiting till they arrive?" asked Red.

"I'm going to give the signal for retiring as soon as the boys get their breath back," remarked the scout master.

"Well, they might be in better places, because the sun feels scorching to me right now," grumbled Red.

"Then pick out your new roost, and be ready to migrate as soon as you hear the whistle. Pass the word along, too, Red."

Presently it was understood that when the scout master gave the signal every fellow was expected to crawl or dart away, seeking through one way or another to get out of the fire zone.

"I hope George has succeeded in explaining everything to the woman by now," remarked Red.

"I'm sure he has, and that the whole of them are even now on the way here to wind up this business," Elmer declared most confidently

When ten minutes nad gone by, and he felt sure that all of the scouts knew what they were expected to do, Elmer took out his whistle.

Then the shrill notes sounded, cutting the air as though charged with irresistible force.

Immediately everybody got busy. Khaki-clad figures could be seen darting this way and that, but none of them made any attempt to advance. This sort of move might be expected to anger the Italians, without doing any good, and the scouts had been warned against it.

There came no second discharge of firearms, and from this fact it seemed evident that the unseen enemy understood that there was nothing hostile connected with this action on the part of the scouts.

Again did Red and Elmer find themselves good neighbors as they arrived at a pile of rocks, behind which they sought shelter.

"All safe?" asked the former.

"Yes, as far as I know," came the answer. "Landy fell all over himself, and started to roll downhill, but one of the other fellows pulled him up. He was limping to beat the band, but I hope it's nothing serious."

"No danger," chuckled Red. "Landy is too well padded to suffer much from a fall. Now do we just wait here till the others fetch the lady?"

"That's a part of the contract," said Elmer; "so just make yourself as comfy as you can."

"And watch the big rock there, eh, Elmer?"

"Oh, if you want. We would feel pretty cheap if they took a sly sneak, and left us in the lurch."

Elmer settled down as though he thought there was no use borrowing trouble. And seeing their leader take things in such a matter-of-fact way the balance of the scouts followed suit.

Confidence thus begets confidence in others; and this in itself was one of Elmer's reasons for acting as he did.

The minutes passed.

Several times did impatient Red get up on his knees to take a look down the hill.

"Shucks! but they're a long time coming," he mumbled. "Perhaps, after all, the old woman was too sharp for the bunch—perhaps she's tucked 'em away in the cabin—turning the tables on our four chums—perhaps, now——"

Right there Red stopped in his predictions of evil.

"There they come," said Elmer, quietly.

One hasty look satisfied Red that his comrade spoke only the truth. Moving figures caught his eye just a little way down the slope.

These presently developed into four boys, three of whom were clad in khaki. The other, who was, of course, George, the interpreter, kept close at the side of the Italian woman.

Now and then she seemed to address some remark to George, which he doubtless answered to the best of his ability. When his vocabulary proved unequal to the task

he would finish with a series of gestures and shrugs as he had seen chattering Italians do.

And presently they reached the spot where the balance of the scouts held forth.

The woman surveyed them as she came up, but Elmer noticed that she did not seem afraid now.

"I guess you've done the business, George," he remarked to the new recruit.

"Well," replied the other, with a broad grin, "that's what I think myself, Elmer."

"She understands now who we are, and that we haven't any intention of doing her men any harm—you explained all that?"

"Sure. And you can see now that instead of looking scared, she's ready to grin if you give her any encouragement," replied George.

"And she knows that we want her to go out with us and have a talk with her old man, telling him what a fool he's been making of himself. She understands all that, does she?"

"Like a book, and is ready to do the trick. We'll have our Nat back in short order, now," George continued, looking proud and happy because he had been able to prove of such valuable assistance to his fellow scouts, even before he got his uniform.

"All right, then. The sooner we start the ball rolling the better. Come along, George."

Presently the two of them were escorting the Italian woman toward the foot of the cliff.

When two thirds of the way there an angry, excitable

voice stopped them. On looking up they could see several heads topping the sparse vegetation that undoubtedly grew along a ledge.

"Now, tell her to talk, George!" said Elmer.

There was hardly any need, for the woman had broken loose on her own account. And such chattering as followed—Lil Artha afterward declared it reminded him of a monkey cage when one of the inmates had taken more than his share of the dinner provided.

But the woman did most of the talking. She also scolded, stamped her foot, and even shook her fist up at those above.

Evidently her arguments must have had a convincing ring about them, for suddenly she turned to George and smiled amiably as she said something, and made a suggestive movement of both shoulders.

"It's all right, Elmer," declared George.

"Are they going to do what we want?" asked the scout master, greatly pleased.

"Sure. And I reckon there he comes now. One of the men seems to be helping Nat down the path that runs along the face of the rock. Bully! We win out!"

A loud cheer from the scouts told how they were enjoying the situation.

Nat Scott waved his hand to them in greeting, for, having lost his hat at the shack, he was bareheaded.

The Italian was still a little suspicious, for he would come only two thirds of the way down. But Nat easily made the balance, and was soon shaking hands with everyone of his mates, just as though he had been separated from them for a week.

Leaving the woman to rejoin her people the scouts made their way down the side of the mountain until they reached the mill pond.

Nat's story was brief, and just about what Elmer had guessed. In prowling around he had unexpectedly come upon the three men.

They had seized upon him and threatened him with their knives if he so much as gave a yell. He had been kept for a short time in the shack. Then Landy's prowling around seemed to fill the Italians with a new alarm, and the three men, together with the woman, had hastily fled.

On the way up the mountain the woman had discovered the loss of something, and gone back.

Then the men forced him to hurry along, and finally landed him on that secret ledge where he believed there was some sort of cave.

That was all Nat knew, and the whole thing smacked strongly of mystery until he heard what Elmer's theory was.

"Anyhow," Nat said, with considerable satisfaction in his voice and manner, "they didn't scare me one little bit. And besides, Elmer, in lots of places I went and made plain marks that I just knew you could read any old time."

"That stamps you a true-blue scout, Nat," declared Elmer, "and I think the troop has reason to be proud of you."

"Three cheers for Comrade Nat Scott," suggested impulsive Red; and they were given with such a vim that many of the big bullfrogs along the farther bank jumped into the mill pond in great alarm.

As their main object had been carried out while on the

way to the haunted mill, and there was no further reason for lingering after they had eaten the "snack" carried along for this purpose, the Hickory Ridge troop of scouts took up the homeward march.

After talking it all over among themselves it was decided that their duty compelled them to give the game and fish warden a hint as to what was probably going on up at Munsey's mill.

He went there with a deputy two days later, but the Italians had taken warning and fled. However, the warden found and destroyed several nets with which the fish poachers had been illegally gathering the finny prizes in the long-deserted pond.

There was one disappointed scout in the troop however, and this was Chatz Maxfield.

He always would feel as though he had missed the opportunity of his life in spending some time at a haunted mill which was supposed to support a good lively ghost, and never once chancing to come upon the hobgoblin.

However, Chatz would continue to live in hope.

At any rate, everyone was positive that he had learned a host of valuable things calculated to make him take higher rank as a woodsman, and a true scout. And no doubt in the annals of the Hickory Ridge Boy Scouts that little hike to Munsey's mill would always be read and reread with the keenest interest, and take rank with the greatest of their achievements.

THE END.

ADDENDA

BOY SCOUT NATURE LORE

BOY SCOUT NATURE LORE TO BE FOUND IN THE HICKORY RIDGE BOY SCOUT SERIES.

Wild Animals of the United States
Tracking
} in Number I.

THE CAMPFIRES OF THE WOLF PATROL.

Trees and Wild Flowers of the United States in Number II

WOODCRAFT, OR HOW A PATROL LEADER MADE GOOD.

Reptiles of the United States in Number III.

PATHFINDER, OR THE MISSING TENDERFOOT.

Fishes of the United States in Number IV.

FAST NINE, OR A CHALLENGE FROM FAIRFIELD.

Insects of the United States in Number V.

GREAT HIKE, OR THE PRIDE OF THE KHAKI TROOP.

Birds of the United States in Number VI.

ENDURANCE TEST, OR HOW CLEAR GRIT WON THE DAY.

THE REPTILES OF THE UNITED STATES.

The reptiles are a class of vertebrate animals. By vertebrate animals is meant those having a backbone. Reptiles are cold-blooded animals having scaly skins, and breathing by lungs and not by gills as do the fish. Strange as it may seem they are related to the birds. In prehistoric times they were of enormous size and many of them were capable of flying. Fossil forms of reptiles are very numerous and scientists have given these fossil forms such sonorous names as Dinosaurs, Ichthyosaurs, Plesiosaurs and Pterosaurs. These names are made up of Greek words meaning terrible lizards, fish lizards, near lizards and winged lizards.

The class of reptiles is made up of five orders:

Sphenodons;
Lacertilia;
Ophidia;
Chelonia;
Crocodilia.

Of the Sphenodons, there is but one living representative. Its home is in New Zealand. Zoologists tell us that this reptile is more closely related to its fossil cousins than any other now in existence. Since we are considering only those reptiles which an American boy may find living in their natural haunts in his home land, discussion of the Sphenodon is out of place in this article. We recommend, however, that you read up about this curious creature that links the gigantic prehistoric lizards with the little creatures of to-day's world.

PTEROSAURS.

THE LIZARDS

THE LACERTILIA OR LIZARDS.

Lizards differ from snakes in that the right and left halves of the lower jaw are joined together by bone instead

LIZARDS.

1. ZEBRA-TAILED LIZARD. 2. PACIFIC SWIFT. 3. COLLARED LIZARD. 4. WHITE-BELLIED SWIFT. 5. COMMON SWIFT OR FENCE LIZARD.

of elastic ligament and in that they have legs and eyelids. They are found in the warmer climates. Most of them

live on insects, but some types as, for instance, the Iguanas, live entirely on vegetable matter, while others prey on birds, mice, frogs, etc.

The Geckos.

The Geckos form a large sub-order of lizards. Their chief characteristic is their adhesive toes, which enable them to cling to and run on smoothest surfaces even when upside down. They do not like the hot sunlight and largely feed at twilight and at night. The Reef Gecko is found in Florida; the Warty Gecko, so called on account of the rows of large wart-like scales on its back and sides, inhabits Lower California; the Cape Gecko, Lower California; the Banded Gecko, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. The latter is the most gaudily marked of the Geckos found in the United States and is likewise the most abundant. It may be seen at dusk coming out of rock crevices to feed on small insects. Many consider this lizard poisonous and its saliva is supposed to produce painful skin eruptions. Authorities, however, tell us that this is not so. The first three Geckos mentioned live largely in trees, but the Banded Gecko lives on or near the ground.

The Chameleons.

The American Chameleons are not true chameleons, but belong to the same family as the Iguana. They have come to be known as Chameleons because, like the rightful owners of that name, they change the color of their bodies. This change is occasioned by the differences of temperature and light. One species is found in the United States and is known under various names, such as the green lizard, the fence lizard and the alligator lizard. It is called alligator lizard from its resemblance to a young alligator. This lizard is found in the southeastern United States from North Carolina to Florida. The common colors of the American Chameleon or the Anolis, which is its scien-

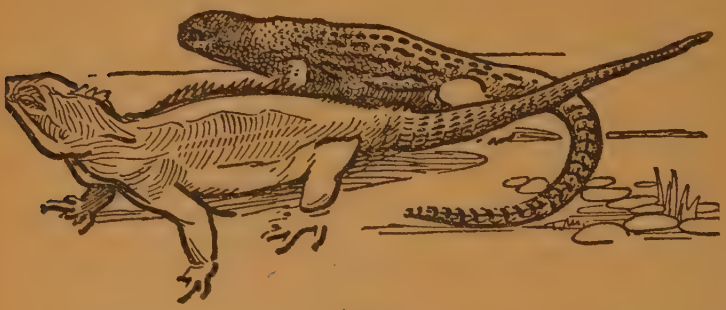
tific name, are brown and green. These colors vary with conditions. When asleep, for instance, this little reptile is green above and white below, and when fighting or frightened it becomes green; at other times it is brown. Raymond L. Ditmars, Curator of Reptiles in the New York Zoological Park, says that in collecting these lizards and placing them in wire-covered boxes, he has "always noted their change from various hues, prior to capture, to a scrambling collection of several dozen emerald-green lizards. If the gauze cage be laid down for half an hour or so while the collector rests, the lizards soon take on a brownish tinge, but as soon as the box is again carried about and the occupants are shaken up and frightened, the brilliant color appears among them all." He further says that "there is no relation or influence between the lizard's colors and its surroundings. The change of color is brought about principally through temperature and light and their influences on the creature's activity; also by anger, fear and sleep."

The Anolis stalks its prey like a cat does a mouse. It crouches and creeps forward for the final spring with motions that are exactly similar. It lives in trees and feeds upon insects. These little creatures make interesting pets and will soon learn to take their food from your hand. The proper quarters for it is a wire-covered fernery which should be placed in a warm but moist situation and the foliage daily sprinkled with water. The Anolis is a great water drinker and will find the drops adhering to the leaves of the plants.

The Iguanas.

There are but few species of Iguanas found in the United States and these only in the southwestern part. They are large in size and have a crest of spiny scales running along the neck and back. They use their tails as weapons of offense and defense. The Cape Iguana is a species found only in Lower California The tail is ringed with large spines. The Black Iguana is found in southern Arizona.

It is a great fighter when at bay and is then no mean antagonist. It does not invite a fight, however, but will run if there is any chance of escape. Both of these Iguanas reach about four feet in length. They have large appetites and eat both animal and vegetable matter—birds, small animals and tender vegetation. In central and southern America their flesh is prized as a food and it is said to have the flavor of chicken. They live part of the time



IGUANA.

in trees and part of the time on the ground. The Desert Iguana, however, is terrestrial. It is found in the desert parts of the southwestern United States—in Colorado, California, Arizona and Nevada. It is largely vegetarian. The tail is brittle, and to free itself when held by it, this creature will easily and readily snap it off.

The Chuckawalla.

There is only one of these that is fairly common in the United States and that is found in the deserts of the southwest. It is the largest lizard found there except the Gila Monster which will be described later. The body of the Chuckawalla is broad and the legs short. Its length averages about a foot. It lives mostly among the rocks of the deserts.

The Collared Lizard.

This lizard is so called on account of the markings of the neck, which have the appearance of a double black collar. The throat is an orange color. It is one of the most gayly colored of the small lizards. It is quite common in the dry and stony parts of the western states and in western Texas is very abundant. It is a great eater and is not afraid to fight for its dinner. One peculiarity of this lizard is its ability to run on its hind legs. It will gulp and bolt food as large as itself.

The Leopard Lizard.

In color it is yellow, spotted with dark spots and lined across the back with dull red lines. Its habitat includes Oregon, California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.

The Zebra-tailed Lizards.

These are small ground lizards found from Texas to California, especially in the dry sections. They run with great rapidity with the tail curved upward, which exposes the markings of the lower surface Frequently they run like the Collared Lizard, on the hind feet. The black-and-white tail markings account for their name.

The Spotted Lizards.

These are small ground lizards found in many states from Kansas to California and southward. They are very quick in their movements. Their food consists of insects of the more sluggish type. They do not stalk their prey like the chameleons.

The Swifts.

There are a great many species of these small lizards in the United States. They live on the ground among rocks in dry places and are called swifts on account of the speed with which they are able to get over the ground. Some of them are covered with spiny scales. Clark's Swift is abundant in certain parts of the country. It is found in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah. It is fond of the strongest sunlight. The Yellow Striped Swift is found from Texas to Nebraska on the north, into Mexico on the south and California on the west.

The Common Swift is found abundantly both in the eastern and in the western United States. They like dry, sandy places among fallen trees, fences, old wood, etc. In color they are gray and are usually in harmony with their surroundings.

The Collared Swift lives among rocks in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. It has a black collar with very sharp spiny scales.

The Horned Lizard.

These lizards are commonly called Horned Toads, because of their resemblance in the shape of their bodies to that of a toad and of their spiny scales which have the appearance of small horns. Their habitat is in the hottest and driest parts of the country. They are fond of the hottest sunlight and bury themselves in sand at the approach of evening.

The Regal Horned Lizard is found in Arizona and Colorado.

The California Horned Lizard is found abundantly in sections of California.

The Snake-like Lizards.

These lizards have elongated bodies with either small limbs or no external evidence of such. Some cannot be

easily distinguished from snakes. On close examination it will be seen that there is a ridge along each side of the body.

The Keeled Lizard has a habit of keeping its tongue protruded and will wipe its lips with it after feeding. Its

HORNED TOAD.

tail is easily separated from its body and when so separated, the broken off portion wriggles violently. New tails grow on. It is found in California, Oregon, Washington and eastward from California to Texas.

The "Glass-Snake" has no limbs and to the eye of anyone but a naturalist would easily be mistaken for a snake. What distinguishes it from a snake is the presence of eyelids and ear holes. It occurs in many localities. It is common from the Carolinas to Florida and as far north as Illinois. Like the Keeled Lizard it has the ability to shed a very lively, wriggling tail. It feeds on worms and slugs that it finds by burrowing and will occasionally break and eat the eggs of ground-nesting birds.

The Beaded Lizards.

This is a family of large lizards whose bodies look as if covered with beads. They are held to be poisonous by well-known authorities and are the only poisonous lizards found in the states.

The Gila Monster (pronounced Hee-la) has a thick body with short limbs and a short tail. In color it is pink and black. Its length is about a foot and a half. It is found in New Mexico and Arizona and is named after the river Gila, the valley of which it inhabits. The creature will defend itself viciously and will hold on tenaciously with its strong jaws. The eggs are buried in the sand.

Xanthus Lizards.

Small lizards that are found where the tree yuccas grow.

The Race Runners.

These are easily distinguished by the yellow stripes on their bodies. They are to be found in the dry, sandy portions of the western states, burrowing in the sand and when pursued taking refuge in these burrows.

The Worm Lizards.

These are a low grade of lizards that live underground like worms. The Worm Lizard, found in Florida, is scarcely

any larger around than an earthworm. It is able to move backward or forward in the earth, the end of the tail being shaped similar to the head.

The Skinks.

This is a large family. They are burrowing lizards. The Red Headed Lizard is widely distributed throughout the United States. It is very timid and extremely difficult to capture. Its color changes with its age. The Black Banded Skink is found in the central portions of the United States. The Florida Skink in southern Florida. The Black Skink from Pennsylvania southward to Texas.

Here we reach the end of the order of reptiles known as lizards; the next order is that of the snakes.

THE SNAKES

THE OPHIDIA OR SNAKES.

Snakes are closely related to lizards. Some lizards, as you have already seen, are very much like snakes in form. The main distinguishing features of the snake are the elastic tissue which connects the two halves of the lower jaw and the absence of eyelids. Snakes are carnivorous and are capable of moving with great ease and swiftness notwithstanding their lack of limbs. They cast their skins several times a year. Many of the snakes are poisonous, and authorities tell us that there is no external characteristic that indicates which are poisonous and which are not.

The Blind Snakes.

This is a low form of snake. They are worm-like and burrowing. The Texas Blind Snake is found in Texas and New Mexico. The California Blind Snake in California and Mexico.

The Boas.

The most common member of this family that comes within the range of this article is a snake that is found in the Pacific states and eastward as far as Nevada. It is over a foot in length and about half an inch in diameter. Various names have been given to it; in certain sections it is called the Rubber Boa, in others the Silver Snake, Two-headed Snake, Worm Snake. The name Two-headed Snake is given it evidently on account of the stubby appearance of the tail end.

The Ribbon Snakes.

These snakes have a yellow stripe along the back and the sides. They are long, slim snakes; specimens have been seen

that measured nearly three feet long, although the average length is about two feet. It is found east of the Mississippi, but is not common. It frequents the banks of water to feed on young frogs and so forth. They swim well and are at home in the water. In the Western Ribbon Snake the back stripe is darker than those on the side, or in some instances a different color.

The Garter Snakes.

These are found all over the United States and are perfectly harmless. They are abundant. Burrowing in the ground in the late fall they remain there all winter. Even the boy living in the large cities may, without going out of the city limits, find these snakes. They are quite commonly found in large public parks. They like frogs and toads and bolt their food. There are many varieties of this snake. Both the Ribbon Snakes and the Garter Snakes belong to the genus Eutænia, which is the most numerous of those of the United States. They are all striped snakes and are very much like the water snakes in structure. There is no easily distinguished characteristic that would enable a boy, at a glance, to tell a Garter Snake. They vary widely in color and marking.

The Water Snakes.

Here is another genus of snakes that is found commonly in many sections of our country. They frequent the vicinity of water and swim with ease, feeding on frogs, toads, fish. The Queen Snake is found generally east of the Mississippi Valley. It is brown above and has yellow stripes on the side. The Banded Water Snake is the water snake which is commonly found in the southern part of the United States east of Texas. It closely resembles the Moccasin, a poisonous snake, and is often mistaken for it. It attains an average length of over a yard. When alarmed, like all the water snakes, it takes to the water for refuge. This genus never preys on birds or mice. It is one of the

most common of the southern snakes. The Red-bellied Water Snake is found in the east, but not north of Virginia. The Common Water Snake is the northern representative of this genus. These snakes are popularly known

WATER SNAKE.

as "Moccasins." The Diamond Back Water Snake is common along the lower Mississippi states. They average four feet in length. May be seen on low branches overhanging water. The Green Water Snake is similar in habit to

the Diamond Back and is found in the Gulf and the Mississippi Valley states. One peculiarity of the water snakes is their love of their home. They pick out a particular sunning place and will return to it regularly.

The Ground Snake or Brown Snake.

This is a common snake, found all over the United States east of the Rocky Mountains. It is small in size, about a foot long and slender, and hides under stones, where it probably feeds on the worms and forms of insect life that live in such places.

The Racers.

The serpents of this type are very active and nervous. The Gopher Snake, or Indigo Snake, is one of the largest found in the United States. It has been known to measure over eight feet in length. It is found from Texas eastward in the Gulf states. Its scales have a polished appearance and are blue black in color. It may be seen in sandy stretches. When feeding it holds its prey down with part of its body. It is not particular as to its diet and will eat birds with the same relish as cold-blooded frogs and toads. In the Central and South American countries this snake is highly valued as a "ratter" and frequents human habitations without fear. The Black Snake is abundant in the United States. It has a bad reputation. It is said to be a fearless fighter, not afraid to attack man even, and to be able to "charm" its prey within its reach. These attributes are popular beliefs without any basis of fact. It is fond of small birds and field mice and is what may be called a meadow snake. When frightened it speeds away at an incredible rate. The Coachwhip Snake, found in the southeast, is even more agile than the Black Snake, and like that serpent, will eat smaller snakes. It gets its name from its slender structure and similarity of the appearance of its scale distribution to a plaited whip. The Striped Racer of the southwestern states is very long and slender.

The Rat Snakes or Colubers.

These are large, strong snakes that squeeze and crush their prey by coiling themselves around it. They are useful to the farmer, as they inhabit grainfields and prey on the rats and mice. An easy way to tell these snakes is by their flat belly. The Fox Snake is quite common in the Central states. It averages about four feet long. It derives its name from an odor which it is able to eject, which smells not unlike that of the fox. Often it will kill and eat animals as large as rabbits. It deposits its eggs in some natural hollow and leaves them there to hatch. A snake that is abundant in the southeastern states is known by the various names of Corn Snake, Red Chicken Snake, Mouse Snake, Scarlet Racer and Red Coluber. It is red, black and white. It is not as much of a climber as the Racers are, nor is it as agile; but it is braver and will fight when cornered. It is frequently found in cornfields, hence its name. The Pilot Black Snake or Mountain Black Snake is often taken for the Common Black Snake. Its head is larger and it is spotted with white. It is a snake frequently found in the same locations as the rattlesnake and copperhead. The Chicken Snake is fond of eggs and young chickens. Like the Fox Snake it will emit an unpleasant odor when caught.

The Bull Snakes.

The Pine or Bull Snake is one of the largest snakes found in the east. It is found in the sandy pine woods of the coast. When disturbed it is vicious in appearance, hisses loudly and strikes vigorously. It feeds on small animals and birds. It is also called the Gopher Snake. "The Yellow Gopher" Snake is found in the middle and western states.

The Green Snakes.

The Green Whip Snake or Magnolia Snake is green above, yellow below. It feeds on insects and is a good climber.

In color it so perfectly matches the leaves and grass that detection is difficult. The " Grass Snake " is a common snake of the northeastern states.

The Ring-necked Snakes.

The eastern Ring-necked Snake is found in the eastern portion of the United States. It has a yellow ring about the neck. This snake is not given to venturing abroad, but prefers to lie under stones and the loose bark of trees.

The King Snakes.

These snakes are remarkable for their colors. They are banded around their bodies with rings of bright colors. They will eat rats and mice and other snakes. The Milk Snake or " Checkered Adder " is popularly supposed to be fond of milk. Scientists tell us that this is a fallacy. It feeds on mice, rats, other snakes and lizards. The Red Milk Snake is prettily colored—red and yellow—and is the type found in the south. All the King Snakes have pronounced patterns. More than in any other genus is the habit of feeding on its kind developed—attacking, and usually successfully, snakes larger than themselves. It is from this characteristic that they derive their name. It is bitten by the poisonous snakes which it attacks but without effect; the King Snake tightens its grip until its adversary is lifeless.

The Rainbow Snakes.

These are sometimes called the mud snakes, from the fact that they are abundant in swamps. They burrow in the mud. The Red-bellied Snake is also called the Rainbow Snake, Mud Snake, Horn Snake and Hoop Snake.

The Hog-nosed Snakes.

These snakes are fighters. The peculiar formation of the mouth makes them easily distinguishable. They hiss when

disturbed and flatten their heads and necks. They are popularly known as "adders" and "vipers." They are found in dry and sandy situations.

The common Hog-nosed Snake is found in dry, sandy locations practically all through the United States except on the Pacific slope. It has the peculiar habit of feigning death when cornered. Before it tries these tactics it will make a terrific show of ferocity. It is capable of flattening its head and neck in a formidable manner and while assuming this attitude it hisses sharply. If this show does not scare away its enemy it will suddenly be seized with a spasm, ending by turning on its back, limp and apparently lifeless. When it thinks danger is past it recovers its normal position and quickly gets away. This snake is known popularly as the "Flat-headed Adder," the "Puff Adder," "Viper" and "Blow Snake."

The Harlequin or Coral Snake.

Is a strikingly marked serpent. Its colors are scarlet, black and yellow. This snake is found in the southeastern and central United States. It is a near relative to the deadly Cobra-de-Capello and is itself poisonous. A burrowing reptile.

The Moccasins.

These snakes are highly poisonous. The Water Moccasin is one of the largest venomous snakes found in the United States. Some have been caught that measured four feet in length and almost two and a half inches around. Certain kinds of harmless water snakes are popularly supposed to be and are called "moccasins." Unless you have a very close knowledge of which is which, you should be careful how near you approach them. The Water Moccasin is found quite abundantly in the east from the Carolinas southward and along the Mississippi states as far north as Illinois. It likes swamps and is found abundantly in many southern swampy sections. This snake is often known as the "Cotton Mouth" Snake. It is vicious and pugnacious

THE MOCCASIN.

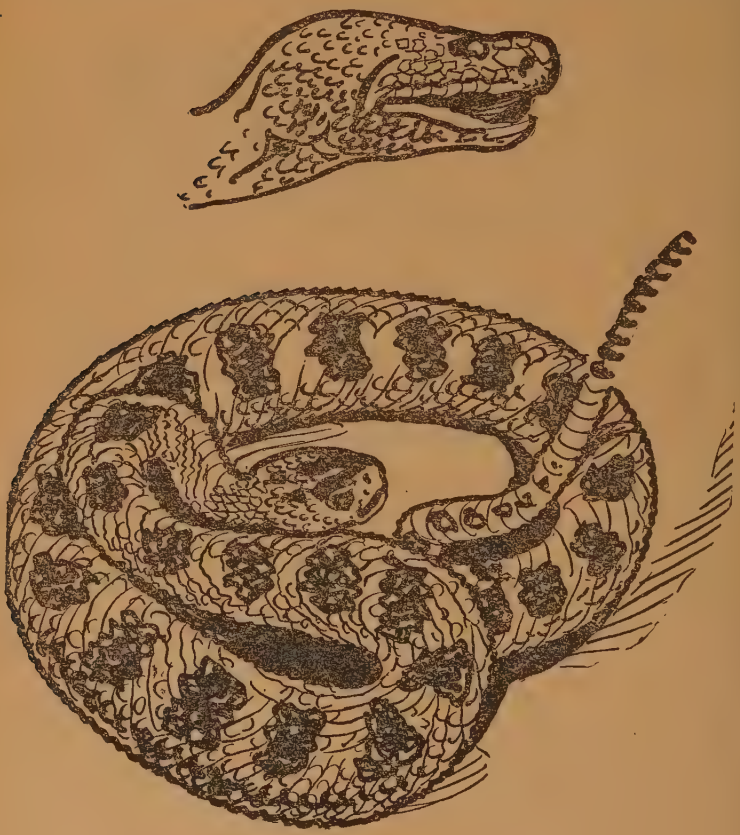
and will fight snakes of any size. The prey of this serpent consists of birds, frogs, other snakes, fish and small animals. The Copperhead derives its name from the copperish tint on its head. It is not as large a snake as the Water Moccasin, nor does it like the swamps. It frequents rocky locations that are thickly wooded. It has a peculiar habit of backing away from danger by looping its body and then drawing it straight again.

The Rattlesnakes.

The rattlesnake is the most interesting as well as the most deadly of the North American serpents. Its chief distinguishing characteristic is the rattle at the end of tail. Curator Ditmars, of the New York Zoological Park, says that although he has "studied living examples of many species of deadly snakes—the South American bushmaster and the fer-de-lance, the African puff adder and the berg adder, and such East Indian species as the king cobra, the spectacled cobra and Russell's viper, and although there is indelibly stamped upon his mind the bloated body, the glassy stare and the rhythmic hissing of the berg adder, the rearing, uncanny pose of an infuriated cobra—there is one image vivid above all, the rattlesnake. Thrown into a gracefully symmetrical coil, the body inflated, the neck arched in an oblique bow in support of the heart-shaped head, the slowly waving tongue with spread and tremulous tips, and above all, the incessant, monotonous whir of the rattle. One stroke—a flash—of that flat head would inject a virus bringing speedy death."

The rattlesnake always warns its enemy of its presence by its rattle. Were it not for this habit there would probably be many more deaths from the bites of this snake. The snake does not add a new ring to its rattle each year, as it is popularly supposed to do. The Massasauga is one of the smaller rattlesnakes, averaging about two feet in length. It inhabits swampy places. The Timber Rattlesnake is found from Vermont to Florida and west to Kansas. It is abundant in the mountains of New York, Mas-

sachusetts and Pennsylvania. In the spring and fall the snakes congregate on ledges of rocks; such places are called



RATTLESNAKE.

"rattlesnake dens." They spend the winter in crevices in these rocky places. The Timber Rattler is more timid

than many of its cousins, preferring flight to combat, but if cornered will fight as fiercely. It feeds on birds and small animals. The largest rattlesnake is the Diamond-back. Specimens have been caught that measured over six feet long and four inches around. This snake is one of the most deadly in the world. It is found most abundantly in Florida. It is never known to strike uncoiled and rarely retreats from danger. The food of this snake seems to consist mostly of small animals. It takes but a minute for the poison from the Diamond-back's fangs to kill a rabbit.

THE TURTLES AND TORTOISES

THE CHELONIA OR TURTLES AND TORTOISES.

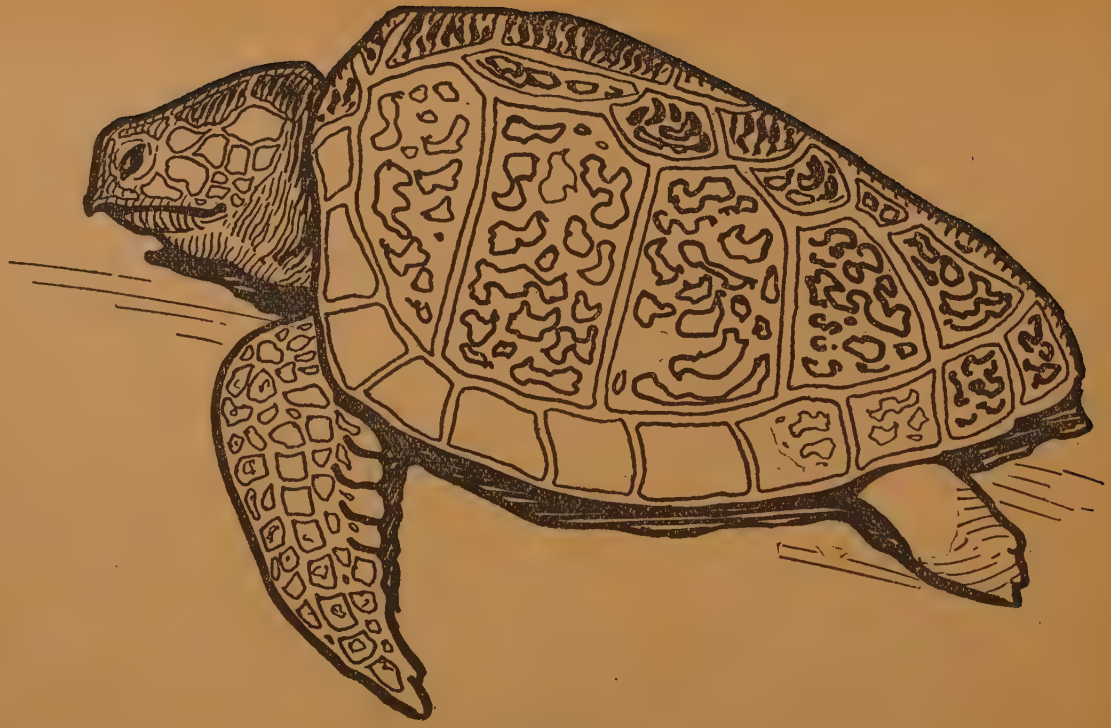
Turtles and tortoises belong to the order known as Chelonia. There are Fresh-water Turtles, Sea Turtles and Land Turtles.

The Sea Turtles.

These turtles are often carried by storm far north of their customary habitat, which is in the warmer waters of the southeastern coast. The Leatherback, or Trunk Turtle, is the largest of the sea turtles, sometimes reaching a weight of half a ton. It is not found in abundance. The Loggerhead Turtle has a very large head. Its eggs are buried in the sand about May or June and the young turtles hatch out in about two months' time. The Green Turtle often strays into northern waters. The flesh of this turtle is prized by epicures. It will die if not placed on its back, the under shell being pressed by the weight of the upper shell against its lungs, causing suffocation. The Hawksbill Turtle is distinguished by the hawk-like appearance of its head. It is the smallest of the sea turtles and the one from which is obtained the sought-after tortoise shells.

The Snapping Turtles.

These are the largest of the fresh-water turtles. Like the snakes they strike at their prey or their enemy, and their sharp mandibles make them a formidable antagonist. They will pull down their prey under the water where they always feed. The Alligator Snapping Turtle is found in the Gulf states. A peculiarity of this reptile is the fleshy

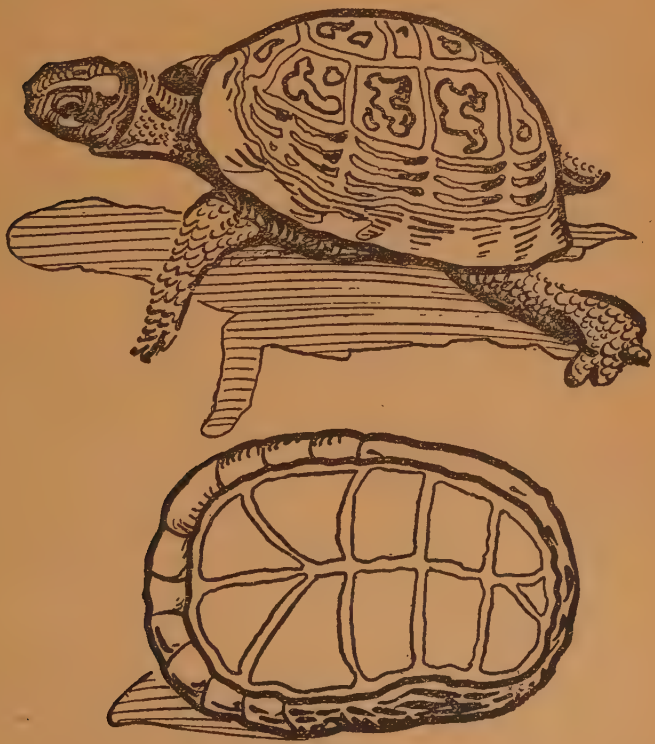


SEA TURTLE.

filament, grub-like in appearance, which it has in its mouth and which acts as a bait, attracting fish within the reach of its powerful jaws.

The Mud Turtles.

The Musk Turtle is a common type of the mud turtle and is found in abundance in the muddy streams of the eastern part of the United States. It will often be taken on a fish



BOX TURTLE.

hook. It derives its name from the odor it gives forth. Seldom is it found out of the water. It snaps when taken in a way which rivals the snapping turtle. The common Mud Turtle is not as abundant as the musk turtle to which it is similar in habit, crawling along the muddy bottoms of ponds and rivers. The under shell of the Mud Turtles is much broader than that of the musk turtles. The Banded Mud Turtle, found in Georgia and Florida, has three yellow stripes or "bands" on its shell. The Yellow-necked Mud Turtle gets its name from its bright yellow neck.

The Terrapins.

The Painted Terrapin or Pond Turtle is brightly colored. The under shell is yellow and the upper shell is bordered with mottled red. It is found in the eastern United States. You may frequently see it taking a sunning on a partially submerged log, diving into the water upon your approach. It feeds on insects, small fishes and water weeds. In your aquarium it will eat small pieces of beef, fish, worms or tender greens. The Chicken Turtle or Long-necked Terrapin is found in the southeastern states. The Yellow-bellied Terrapin is found from Virginia to Georgia. It is one of the terrapins that are sold in the markets. Many may be seen there, especially in Charleston. The Cumberland Terrapin may be known by the red marking on each side of its head. This, too, is sold in the markets; it is found in the middle western states. The Diamond Back Terrapin is the most highly prized by epicures—seven-inch-long turtles bringing as much as $5 or more apiece. It is found in the marshes of the eastern and southeastern coast states. As the size increases, the price advances. They are becoming scarce. It always feeds under water. Grows to larger size in the South. The Spotted Turtle is found in abundant quantities in the eastern states. It has round yellow spots scattered over its black upper shell and may be seen near ponds, streams and marshy places. It is fond of water that is grassy, hiding therein.

The Box Turtles.

This turtle is fitted with a complete suit of armor, into which it can withdraw and become practically immune from harm. It is not an aquatic reptile, its food consisting principally of vegetation. It is fond of berries and is found most abundantly in grassy thickets. It lives many years. At the approach of winter it burrows into the ground.

The Tortoises.

The Tortoises live only on the land. The Gopher Tortoise is found from South Carolina to Florida, and west as far as Texas. It feeds on vegetation. It inhabits principally the dry and sandy places and makes long burrows into which it retires from the hot midday sun. The eggs of this tortoise are buried in the sand and are hatched by the sun's rays Agassiz's Tortoise, or the Desert Tortoise, is distributed over the deserts of Arizona and southern California.

The Soft-shelled Turtles.

The shells of these turtles are soft and the head has the distinguishing characteristic of a pointed nose. They are aquatic and are much like the snapping turtles in habit. Large specimens can do damage with their sharp jaws. They are popularly known as "flapjack turtles," and they do not look unlike large pancakes. They are vicious and can make severe wounds or injuries. Their food is the same as that of the snapping turtles; in fact, they have so many points in common that they are often called "soft-shelled snapping turtles."

THE CROCODILES AND ALLIGATORS

THE CROCODILIA OR THE CROCODILES AND ALLIGATORS.

The Crocodiles and Alligators belong to that order of reptiles known as Crocodilia. The Alligator's head is broad and blunt; the Crocodile's is narrow and sharp.

1. ALLIGATOR. 2. CROCODILE.

The Alligators are distributed over the low and swampy ground from North Carolina southward, but are becoming rare almost to the point of extinction. Their skin is valued and their eggs are sought as food so that they are annually becoming rarer. They are afraid of man, but if cornered will fight. Their jaws are large, powerful and provided with strong teeth, capable of inflicting serious injury. They feed on fish, animals and birds. Alligators make a "bellowing" sound. The Crocodile is livelier and more pugnacious than the Alligator, but there are no "man-eating" Crocodiles in the United States.

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THE FACTS IN THE CASE

OF

M. VALDEMAR.

Of course I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion. It would have been a miracle had it not—especially under the circumstances. Through the desire of all parties concerned, to keep the affair from the public, at least for the present, or until we had farther opportunities for investigation—through our endeavors to effect this—a garbled or exaggerated account made its way into society, and became the source of many unpleasant misrepresentations; and, very naturally, of a great deal of disbelief.

It is now rendered necessary that I give the *facts*—as far as I comprehend them myself. They are, succinctly, these:

My attention, for the last three years, had been repeatedly drawn to the subject of Mesmerism; and about nine months ago, it occurred to me, quite suddenly, that in the series of experiments made hitherto, there had been a very remarkable and most unaccountable omission:—no person had as yet been mesmerized *in articulo mortis*. It remained to be seen, first, whether, in such condition, there existed in the patient any susceptibility to the magnetic influence; secondly, whether, if any existed, it was impaired or increased by the condition; thirdly, to what extent, or for how long a period, the encroachments of Death might be arrested by the process. There were other points to be ascertained, but these most excited my curiosity—the last in especial, from the immensely important character of its consequences.

In looking around me for some subject by whose means I might test these particulars, I was brought to think of my friend, M. Ernest Valdemar, the well-known compiler of the "Bibliotheca Forensica," and author (under the *nom de plume*

of Issachar Marx) of the Polish versions of "Wallenstein" and "Gargantua." M. Valdemar, who has resided principally at Harlem, N. Y., since the year 1839, is (or was) particularly noticeable for the extreme spareness of his person—his lower limbs much resembling those of John Randolph; and, also, for the whiteness of his whiskers, in violent contrast to the blackness of his hair—the latter, in consequence, being very generally mistaken for a wig. His temperament was markedly nervous, and rendered him a good subject for mesmeric experiment. On two or three occasions I had put him to sleep with little difficulty, but was disappointed in other results which his peculiar constitution had naturally led me to anticipate. His will was at no period positively, or thoroughly, under my control, and in regard to *clairvoyance*, I could accomplish with him nothing to be relied upon. I always attributed my failure at these points to the disordered state of his health. For some months previous to my becoming acquainted with him, his physicians had declared him in a confirmed phthisis. It was his custom, indeed, to speak calmly of his approaching dissolution, as of a matter neither to be avoided nor regretted.

When the ideas to which I have alluded first occurred to me, it was of course very natural that I should think of M. Valdemar. I knew the steady philosophy of the man too well to apprehend any scruples from *him;* and he had no relatives in America who would be likely to interfere. I spoke to him frankly upon the subject; and to my surprise, his interest seemed vividly excited. I say to my surprise; for, although he had always yielded his person freely to my experiments, he had never before given me any tokens of sympathy with what I did. His disease was of that character which would admit of exact calculation in respect to the epoch of its termination in death; and it was finally arranged between us that he would send for me about twenty-four hours before the period announced by his physicians as that of his decease.

It is now rather more than seven months since I received, from M. Valdemar himself, the subjoined note:

"My dear P——,

"You may as well come *now*. D—— and F—— are agreed that I cannot hold out beyond to-morrow midnight; and I think they have hit the time very nearly.

"Valdemar."

I received this note within half an hour after it was written, and in fifteen minutes more I was in the dying's man chamber. I had not seen him for ten days, and was appalled by the fearful alteration which the brief interval had wrought in him. His face wore a leaden hue ; the eyes were utterly lustreless ; and the emaciation was so extreme, that the skin had been broken through by the cheek-bones. His expectoration was excessive. The pulse was barely perceptible. He retained, nevertheless, in a very remarkable manner, both his mental power and a certain degree of physical strength. He spoke with distinctness—took some palliative medicines without aid —and, when I entered the room, was occupied in penciling memoranda in a pocket-book. He was propped up in the bed by pillows. Doctors D—— and F—— were in attendance.

After pressing Valdemar's hand, I took these gentlemen aside, and obtained from them a minute account of the patient's condition. The left lung had been for eighteen months in a semi-osseous or cartilaginous state, and was, of course, entirely useless for all purposes of vitality. The right, in its upper portion, was also partially, if not thoroughly, ossified, while the lower region was merely a mass of purulent tubercles, running one into another. Several extensive perforations existed ; and, at one point, permanent adhesion to the ribs had taken place. These appearances in the right lobe were of comparatively recent date. The ossification had proceeded with very unusual rapidity ; no sign of it had been discovered a month before, and the adhesion had only been observed during the three previous days. Independently of the phthisis, the patient was suspected of aneurism of the aorta ; but on this point the osseous symptoms rendered an exact diagnosis impossible. It was the opinion of both physicians that M. Valdemar would die about midnight on the morrow (Sunday). It was then seven o'clock on Saturday evening.

On quitting the invalid's bedside to hold conversation with myself, Doctors D—— and F—— had bidden him a final farewell. It had not been their intention to return ; but, at my request, they agreed to look in upon the patient about ten the next night.

When they had gone, I spoke freely with M. Valdemar on the subject of his approaching dissolution, as well as, more particularly, of the experiment proposed. He still professed himself quite willing and even anxious to have it made, and

urged me to commence it at once. A male and a female nurse were in attendance; but I did not feel myself altogether at liberty to engage in a task of this character with no more reliable witnesses than these people, in case of sudden accident, might prove. I therefore postponed operations until about eight the next night, when the arrival of a medical student with whom I had some acquaintance (Mr. Theodore L——l), relieved me from further embarrassment. It had been my design, originally, to wait for the physicians; but I was induced to proceed, first, by the urgent entreaties of M. Valdemar, and secondly, by my conviction that I had not a moment to lose, as he was evidently sinking fast.

Mr. L——l was so kind as to accede to my desire that he would take notes of all that occurred; and it is from his memoranda that what I now have to relate is, for the most part, either condensed or copied *verbatim*.

It wanted about five minutes of eight when, taking the patient's hand, I begged him to state, as distinctly as he could, to Mr. L——l, whether he (M. Valdemar) was entirely willing that I should make the experiment of mesmerizing him in his then condition.

He replied feebly, yet quite audibly, "Yes, I wish to be mesmerized"—adding immediatly afterward, "I fear you have deferred it too long."

While he spoke thus, I commenced the passes which I had already found most effectual in subduing him. He was evidently influenced with the first lateral stroke of my hand across his forehead; but although I exerted all my powers, no further perceptible effect was induced until some minutes after ten o'clock, when Doctors D—— and F—— called, according to appointment. I explained to them, in a few words, what I designed, and as they opposed no objection, saying that the patient was already in the death agony, I proceeded without hesitation—exchanging, however, the lateral passes for downward ones, and directing my gaze entirely into the right eye of the sufferer.

By this time his pulse was imperceptible and his breathing was stertorous, and at intervals of half a minute.

This condition was nearly unaltered for a quarter of an hour. At the expiration of this period, however, a natural although a very deep sigh escaped the bosom of the dying man, and the stertorous breathing ceased—that is to say, its stertoriousness was no longer apparent; the intervals were

undiminished. The patient's extremities were of an icy coldness.

At five minutes before eleven, I perceived unequivocal signs of the mesmeric influence. The glassy roll of the eye was changed for that expression of uneasy *inward* examination which is never seen except in cases of sleep-waking, and which it is quite impossible to mistake. With a few rapid lateral passes I made the lids quiver, as in incipient sleep, and with a few more I closed them altogether. I was not satisfied, however, with this, but continued the manipulations vigorously, and with the fullest exertion of the will, until I had completely stiffened the limbs of the slumberer, after placing them in a seemingly easy position. The legs were at full length; the arms were nearly so, and reposed on the bed at a moderate distance from the loins. The head was very slightly elevated.

When I had accomplished this, it was fully midnight, and I requested the gentlemen present to examine M. Valdemar's condition. After a few experiments, they admitted him to be in an unusually perfect state of mesmeric trance. The curiosity of both the physicians was greatly excited. Dr. D—— resolved at once to remain with the patient all night, while Dr. F—— took leave with a promise to return at daybreak. Mr. L——l and the nurses remained.

We left M. Valdemar entirely undisturbed until about three o'clock in the morning, when I approached him and found him in precisely the same condition as when Dr. F—— went away—that is to say, he lay in the same position; the pulse was imperceptible; the breathing was gentle (scarcely noticeable, unless through the application of a mirror to the lips); the eyes were closed naturally; and the limbs were as rigid and as cold as marble. Still, the general appearance was certainly not that of death.

As I approached M. Valdemar I made a kind of half effort to influence his right arm into pursuit of my own, as I passed the latter gently to and fro above his person. In such experiments with this patient, I had never perfectly succeeded before, and assuredly I had little thought of succeeding now; but to my astonishment, his arm very readily, although feebly, followed every direction I assigned it with mine. I determined to hazard a few words of conversation.

"M. Valdemar," I said, "are you asleep?" He made no answer, but I perceived a tremor about the lips, and was thus

induced to repeat the question, again and again. At its third repetition, his whole frame was agitated by a very slight shivering; the eyelids unclosed themselves so far as to display a white line of a ball; the lips moved sluggishly, and from between them, in a barely audible whisper, issued the words:

"Yes;—asleep now. Do not wake me!—let me die so!"

I here felt the limbs and found them as rigid as ever. The right arm, as before, obeyed the direction of my hand. I questioned the sleep-waker again:

"Do you still feel pain in the breast, M. Valdemar?"

The answer now was immediate, but even less audible than before:

"No pain—I am dying."

I did not think it advisable to disturb him farther just then, and nothing more was said or done until the arrival of Dr. F——, who came a little before sunrise, and expressed unbounded astonishment at finding the patient still alive. After feeling the pulse and applying a mirror to the lips, he requested me to speak to the sleep-waker again. I did so, saying:

"M. Valdemar, do you still sleep?"

As before, some minutes elapsed ere a reply was made; and during the interval the dying man seemed to be collecting his energies to speak. At my fourth repetition of the question, he said very faintly, almost inaudibly:

"Yes; still asleep—dying."

It was now the opinion, or rather the wish, of the physicians, that M. Valdemar should be suffered to remain undisturbed in his present apparently tranquil condition, until death should supervene—and this, it was generally agreed, must now take place within a few minutes. I concluded, however, to speak to him once more, and merely repeated my previous question.

While I spoke, there came a marked change over the countenance of the sleep-waker. The eyes rolled themselves slowly open, the pupils disappearing upwardly; the skin generally assumed a cadaverous hue, resembling not so much parchment as white paper; and the circular hectic spots which, hitherto, had been strongly defined in the centre of each cheek, *went out* at once. I use this expression, because the suddenness of their departure put me in mind of nothing so much as the extinguishment of a candle by a puff of the breath. The upper lip, at the same time, writhed itself away

from the teeth, which it had previously covered completely; while the lower jaw fell with an audible jerk, leaving the mouth widely extended, and disclosing in full view the swollen and blackened tongue. I presume that no member of the party then present had been unaccustomed to death-bed horrors; but so hideous beyond conception was the appearance of M. Valdemar at this moment, that there was a general shrinking back from the region of the bed.

I now feel that I have reached a point of this narrative at which every reader will be startled into positive disbelief. It is my business, however, simply to proceed.

There was no longer the faintest sign of vitality in M. Valdemar; and concluding him to be dead, we were consigning him to the charge of the nurses, when a strong vibratory motion was observable in the tongue. This continued for perhaps a minute. At the expiration of this period, there issued from the distended and motionless jaws a voice—such as it would be madness in me to attempt describing. There are, indeed, two or three epithets which might be considered as applicable to it in part; I might say, for example, that the sound was harsh, and broken, and hollow; but the hideous whole is indescribable, for the simple reason that no similar sounds have ever jarred upon the ear of humanity. There were two particulars, nevertheless, which I thought then, and still think, might fairly be stated as characteristic of the intonation—as well adapted to convey some idea of its unearthly peculiarity. In the first place, the voice seemed to reach our ears—at least mine—from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth. In the second place, it impressed me (I fear, indeed, that it will be impossible to make myself comprehended) as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch.

I have spoken both of "sound" and of "voice." I mean to say that the sound was one of distinct—of even wonderfully, thrillingly distinct—syllabification. M. Valdemar *spoke*—obviously in reply to the question I had propounded to him a few minutes before. I had asked him, it will be remembered, if he still slept. He now said:

"Yes;—no;—I *have been* sleeping—and now—now—I *am dead!*"

No person present even affected to deny, or attempted to repress, the unutterable, shuddering horror which these few words, thus uttered, were so well calculated to convey. Mr.

L——l (the student) swooned. The nurses immediately left the chamber, and could not be induced to return. My own impressions I would not pretend to render intelligible to the reader. For nearly an hour we busied ourselves, silently—without the utterance of a word—in endeavors to revive Mr. L——l. When he came to himself we addressed ourselves again to an investigation of M. Valdemar's condition.

It remained in all respects as I have last described it, with the exception that the mirror no longer afforded evidence of respiration. An attempt to draw blood from the arm failed. I should mention, too, that this limb was no farther subject to my will. I endeavored in vain to make it follow the direction of my hand. The only real indication, indeed, of the mesmeric influence, was now found in the vibratory movement of the tongue, whenever I addressed M. Valdemar a question. He seemed to be making an effort to reply, but had no longer sufficient volition. To queries put to him by any other person than myself he seemed utterly insensible—although I endeavored to place each member of the company in mesmeric *rapport* with him. I believe that I have now related all that is necessary to an understanding of the sleep-waker's state at this epoch. Other nurses were procured; and at ten o'clock I left the house in company with the two physicians and Mr. L——l.

In the afternoon we all called again to see the patient. His condition remained precisely the same. We had now some discussion as to the propriety and feasibility of awakening him; but we had little difficulty in agreeing that no good purpose would be served by so doing. It was evident that, so far, death (or what is usually termed death) had been arrested by the mesmeric process. It seemed clear to us all that to awaken M. Valdemar would be merely to insure his instant, or at least his speedy dissolution.

From this period until the close of last week—*an interval of nearly seven months*—we continued to make daily calls at M. Valdemar's house, accompanied, now and then, by medical and other friends. All this time the sleep-waker remained *exactly* as I have last described him. The nurses' attentions were continual.

It was on Friday last that we finally resolved to make the experiment of awakening, or attempting to awaken him; and it is the (perhaps) unfortunate result of this latter experiment which has given rise to so much discussion in private circles

—to so much of what I cannot help thinking unwarranted popular feeling.

For the purpose of relieving M. Valdemar from the mesmeric trance, I made use of the customary passes. These, for a time, were unsuccessful. The first indication of revival was afforded by a partial descent of the iris. It was observed, as especially remarkable, that this lowering of the pupil was accompanied by the profuse out-flowing of a yellowish ichor (from beneath the lids) of a pungent and highly offensive odor.

It was now suggested that I should attempt to influence the patient's arm, as heretofore. I made the attempt and failed. Dr. F—— then intimated a desire to have me put a question. I did so as follows:

"M. Valdemar, can you explain to us what are your feelings or wishes now?"

There was an instant return of the hectic circles on the cheeks; the tongue quivered, or rather rolled violently in the mouth (although the jaws and lips remained rigid as before); and at length the same hideous voice which I have already described, broke forth:

"For God's sake!—quick!—quick!—put me to sleep—or, quick!—waken me!—quick!—*I say to you that I am dead!*"

I was thoroughly unnerved, and for an instant remained undecided what to do. At first I made an endeavor to recompose the patient; but, failing in this through total abeyance of the will, I retraced my steps and as earnestly struggled to awaken him. In this attempt I soon saw that I should be successful—or at least I soon fancied that my success would be complete—and I am sure that all in the room were prepared to see the patient awaken.

For what really occurred, however, it is quite impossible that any human being could have been prepared.

As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of "dead! dead!" absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely *rotted* away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence.

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